Silently Yours

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Silently Yours

by Sumrase

Summary

Kang Yeosang is the only beta in ATEEZ. Over the years, he finds himself pushed to the sidelines of the pack dynamics. With no idea on how to reinsert himself, he makes the very dramatic decision to leave the pack altogether.

OR

Yeosang's decision to suffer in silence backfires and hurts everyone involved.

Notes

Honestly, this might not make sense since I'm still not sure where it's going so do with that information what you'd like.

I don't even know what the story title means or if I'll keep it the same…

Anyways, I hope you enjoy the first chapter:)

Yeosang

"Alright, that's a wrap," the director called out. Yeosang bowed habitually with his members as they offered their thanks to the staff. The filming crew returned their bows with light applause. While the other members relaxed and dropped their on-camera personas, Yeosang grew tense. He silently faded into the background and tried to be inconspicuous as the alphas checked in with the teams omegas.

The days shooting had been particularly incredibly stimulating, so much so that even he as a beta was feeling overwhelmed. His sense were running haywire, his heart palpitating and his palms sweating. He knew his limits and this was not an anxiety attack he could simply talk himself through. He crouched down in a dark corner of the studio and desperately sought out the alphas. Yeosang wished he could call out to one of them for assistance but he knew they'd find it odd. After all, he was a beta. He was supposed to be self sufficient.

Yeosang first spotted Hongjoong. The Captain was standing in front of Wooyoung, guiding him through breathing exercises. Yunho was not too far away, hugging Mingi comfortingly as he whispered words Yeosang yearned to hear. On the opposite side of the room, San was gently calming a pacing Seonghwa. Though fans were aware of their secondary genders, the group did their best not to showcase that dynamic too much. It felt a bit more personal and so they did their best to minimize it. Jongho was the only free Alpha, sitting near the exit with his eyes hooded as he watched over the others. Yeosang stared at him longingly as his palpitations grew fiercer. Yeosang watched from the sidelines with familiar jealousy as the omegas were doted on. He tore his eyes away and glanced at the other Alphas carefully.

Yunho and San weren't giving him much to work with so he turned his full attention to Hongjoong, secretly watching his hands and following the breathing motions he was guiding Wooyoung through. He hurriedly erected a mental barrier as a pang of loneliness he couldn't smother echoed through his chest, filling his eyes with moisture. Thankfully, Hongjoong's breathing tactics were effective and his anxiety eased, leaving him overwhelmingly despondent. He stood and shakily made his way to Jongho in preparation for heading home.

In the beginning, back when he had first presented as a beta. Yeosang spent many nights cursing his orientation. They'd all expected him to present as an omega due to his innate characteristics so they'd been caught off guard. Initially, their change in behaviour towards him had given him whiplash. He'd gone from being treated gently to being left to fend for himself, physically and mentally. As the years had passed, he'd just come to painfully accept it.

He was a beta and he was going to be treated as one.

His only reprieve came on camera. Before presenting, fans had labelled him as soft and in need of protection and coddling and so the company had requested they played it up a bit for publicity even after they had all reached maturity. San and Wooyoung took to it the easiest with Seonghwa and Jongho close behind. Of course, Yeosang had to make it interesting by playing up the aloof beta but the members tenacity had become popular amongst fans.

Yeosang truly cherished those moments. The pack bonds which grown increasingly painful overtime were given a moment of reprieve with every on screen hug. Enough affection even made sleeping without waking up every two hours for painkillers possible. Out of the seven bonds, four constantly throbbed. He didn't know why his bonds with the Alpha's had withered beyond recognition while the omega bonds remained relatively healthy. The pack bonds were still a mystery to Yeosang. Science said that every bond needed to be nurtured. There were different ways to nurture each bond. Alpha's bonds were strengthened when they took care of others. Beta bonds relied heavily on emotional connections. Omegas relied majorly on physical touch. Yeosang took great care in trying to remain connected with his members. For some odd reason, the bonds with the Alphas hurt constantly. It was odd, considering his sub-gender but the only time the pain lessened was when they were touching him. Kisses lasted him long enough to sleep a bit better and so he prayed for the moments the members would fight his obligatory resistance.

Unfortunately, he hadn't gotten more than a hug from Yunho today. He could already feel the bonds growing limp as he followed them to the change rooms. He blindly sought out Seonghwa's bond, seeking a little strength but found that Seonghwa's shields were up. He withdrew pitifully and stood in close range to Jongho. He zoned out for a bit, examining his bonds and contemplating on whether he should just sever the withered ropes that caused him so much agony. If he cut those ties though, he would be torn from the omegas as well. They couldn't be pack with someone who wasn't bonded to their Head Alpha.

"How's the suppressant working?" He overheard Jongho asking Wooyoung. He zoned back in to hear his friend's response.

"Could be better. Let's hurry home please," the younger responded. Yeosang grimaced and rushed to grab his things. The room buzzed with urgency as his members and staff rushed to get out quicker.

Their managers had parked the car in the garage to bypass their fans but some had thought ahead and were staking out the back entrance when they emerged from the elevators. Yeosang ducked his head and moved with the group, careful not to get separated. He felt a familiar pair of hands grab his shoulders as San stepped up behind him, ushering him to the car. Yeosang worked hard to suppress a shiver. San took his duty as a pack protector seriously and had self appointed himself to Yeosang when they were surrounded by outsiders. He claimed that an Alpha still outranked a Beta and it was his duty to make sure Yeosang was safe from fan Alphas. It made Yeosang's stomach feel tight and gooey at the same time. He knew San only did this since Yeosang was even worse than the omegas at upholding his own boundaries when it came to strangers but it still made him feel cherished. As a beta, this should have made him feel uncomfortable but he secretly enjoyed it. He didn't understand why he was so different. All of his beta friends hated when their Alpha friends tried to assert any form of dominance over them but it just made Yeosang feel safe and flustered. The feeling of safety vanished the second they entered their van however.

In his excitement of being safeguarded by San, he'd forgotten about Wooyoung's impending heat and the unwritten rules of the pack. San growled and yanked him back by the collar of his shirt when he moved to sit beside him.

"I'll sit with him," San said lightly, climbing in first and heading to the backseat. Goosebumps covered Yeosang's arms as his beta shuddered in fear, curling in on itself.

His beta was another mystery. His teachers had explained their sub-genders as a physical entity; something deeply primal that sat deep in their chest. Beta's were supposed to be confident, friendly, and laid back. Yeosang's beta clearly hadn't got the memo though. He was anxious, shy, and extremely tense. Nothing made his beta more anxious and tense that the possessive growls of the Alpha's as they claimed their territory.

The gap between the deep growl and the light hearted sentences that followed always played games with Yeosang's psyche. When this had first started, he'd assumed it to be a joke and would just respond with a light eye roll as he backed off to appease his beta's anxiety. He would blush darkly, a natural response due to his beta's primal response but he managed to play it off as just being flustered rather than frightened. The Alphas had been consistent though. The growl's had grown more menacing, shaking him up from the inside out. Now, the sound filled him with visceral fear, his stomach cramping with nausea and heart thundering as adrenaline coursed through him.

He sat down in the front seat and stared ahead blankly, taking deep breaths so the members wouldn't hear him hyperventilating. The ride home was filled with heavy silence. The intense scent emanating from Wooyoung filled the car and had their alpha manager and the present alpha members on edge. Wooyoung normally smelt like freshly baked cinnamon but, during his heats, the scent became overwhelmingly sweet. Yeosang was almost grateful that he wasn't as heavily affected by the omegas heats. While their smell was alluring, it didn't drive him crazy like it did the alphas.

Unfortunately for him, the scent triggered something else entirely. Intense feelings of abandonment and fear. Yeosang teetered on the edge whenever a pack member went through a heat or a rut. The easygoing camaraderie vanished as the Alphas and omegas allowed their more animalistic instincts to surface. He became somewhat of an outsider at times like this and had to tread carefully. When they arrived at their building, they entered through the backdoor again and waited for the elevator in silence. Though all three dorms were on three different floors, the pack spent a lot of time in the YunSang dorm since the third room in there had been dubbed the pack's Nesting Room. The name rubbed Yeosang wrong as he had never been in there outside of his turn for clean up duty. Sometimes, his pack members would take his sheets to add to the overall scent of the Nest but they had never invited him in. Seonghwa said it made the pack feel complete even if Yeosang was not physically present. Still, it was the room designated for helping the members out with their heats and ruts. Today was no different. Yeosang watched as the seven members headed straight for the pack room. He made eye contact with Mingi as he shut the door behind him, the rapper smiling and winking before he shut the door with a deafening click.

Alone in a full house, Yeosang sighed heavily. He wanted nothing more than to curl up under his sheets and sleep the pain away but the withered bonds were throbbing incessantly. He would have to wait for the sleeping pills to kick in before he could lie down. He popped two and a couple of painkillers before setting about his nightly routine. Halfway through, Hongjoong had knocked and asked for a sweater of his. He handed him an oversized hoodie he knew Wooyoung liked to wear, wondering if this would be the last time he did it.

Once done his routine, he headed to the kitchen and pulled out a tray. He placed two stacks of cups and a large water jug on it and carried it to the pack room. There was a slim, long table on the wall near the door. Moving some of the decor, Yeosang placed the tray down carefully. Someone would come out for it after the first wave of Wooyoung's heat receded. Yeosang returned to the kitchen and set about making a snack tray as well. They would be hungry too. By the time he had finished, he still wasn't feeling tired enough to sleep through the pain. With a defeated sigh, he slipped under his sheets.

Curled up in bed, he picked up his phone and opened twitter. He scrolled for a bit before he gave in and searched his own name. The first video that popped up was of San. The caption was gushing over how San had chosen him back as the cutest member of ATEEZ. He'd done one more and teased the fans, claiming ownership of the beta. Yeosang closed the app and put his phone down, heart sinking in his chest. He couldn't do this anymore. What should have filled Yeosang with joy instead burned viciously in his stomach. He was just so tired of this act. His heart couldn't handle the difference in his relationships with the members on camera versus off camera. He knew it was their job to make them look like a solid unit to the fans and maybe it wouldn't have bothered him if they all treated each other differently off camera as well.

But it was only him.

If he was being honest, things had been going downhill since debut. It had all started when he'd presented as a beta instead of an Alpha or omega. He'd been the second member to present, after Seonghwa's omega trait. Hongjoong had followed closely as an Alpha with Jongho weeks after. Mingi and Wooyoung presented as omegas the following month with San hot on their tails as an Alpha. With four Alphas, one beta and three omegas, finding a new normal had been a challenge for all the members. It had taken time for them to find a rhythm as they navigated new heats and ruts together. The alphas grew more possessive and the omegas grew compliant, submitting to the whims of the alphas. And somehow, during that single year, Yeosang found himself an outsider in his group. Overnight, he'd been pushed to the edge of their social group, designated to a role he didn't fully identify with. Maybe it was because he didn't experience heats and ruts like they did that they had come to some unspoken understanding that he didn't need them the same way. The other members had become romantically involved with one another after months of assisting each other through their cycles and somehow, Yeosang had remained the only platonic member in their polycule. All these years later and the only kisses he'd received from them had been teasing kisses to the cheek for their fandom.

The worst part, though, was his painful bonds. No beta he knew ever complained of bonds hurting. He remembered casually mentioning it to a beta friend and she had looked at him oddly and said she had never experienced that. He'd been humiliated by that and had never brought it up again. With only the Alpha bonds hurting, Yeosang wondered if he was an anomaly of sorts. He'd never heard of painful bonds in his beta sex ed class either. He'd thought himself lucky since he only had to learn about his gender while the others had been forced to learn about each other too but now he felt like gaps were missing and the search engines were not filling them. He was sure there were answers in the longer articles but he never had time to do a proper in depth search session with his packed schedule and sleep deprived mind. He eventually came to the conclusion that the bond must not hurt from their

end. Unfortunately, he had never been the type to be able to seek out physical touch and his members didn't seek him out frequently so he remained in a constant state of agony. He simply tried to cherish the moments of peace they unknowingly gave him and left it at that.

Besides, he was a beta. He wasn't supposed to need them like that.

His bonds held a different opinion though. During heats, even the omega bonds began to weaken. The once thick and thriving bonds would slim down, barely pulsating in his head. It took days, sometimes weeks, of extensive effort to bring them back to their normal health. The shared emotions grew dull and he had to focus to feel an echo of their emotions. He appreciated it at times like this, when he knew they were next door enjoying an intimacy he would never get to experience with them. He didn't have to hurt further than his imagination and early memories.

With all of these anomalies, Yeosang had to wonder if he was the cause for the struggling bonds. Maybe he hadn't worked hard enough to nourish them. He'd tried his best in the beginning, before anyone had presented. He'd built strong and healthy bonds with all the members individually after they had chosen to leave their family packs and come together. Eight makes one after all. Time had changed that though. His sex ed teacher had said it was natural. Beta bonds required less effort and tended to be smaller, though no less strong. They also apparently took the platonic relationship into consideration, requiring even less from them. His mental health had taken the brunt as his bonds had decreased in size and strength. It had filled him with such strong feelings of rejection and loneliness to the point where he'd started to daydream about breaking the bonds. Night after night he'd spent in bed, wondering how that would look.

The sleep would probably be immaculate.

Four months ago, he'd decided it was time to let go; of both the pack and ATEEZ. He hadn't thought they could get much thinner but the moment he'd made the decision, he felt a change. It had taken months to wither away and now, the Alpha bonds were holding on by a single tether. Once the first one snapped, Yeosang would have to manually cut the rest. Instead of waiting for that, Yeosang had been planning carefully.

Come the weekend, he would do it. He'd already booked the hotel room where it would happen. His research had warned him that breaking a bond was excruciating. To break multiple at once was considered dangerous and to not be done without a doctor present. However, this had been for healthy bonds. Considering the state of his bonds, it should not be too bad.

Yeosang plugged his phone into the charger and rolled over. He was running out of time, he could feel it. They would snap by themselves if he didn't end up doing it. He just hoped the fallout was something he could bear. The medication finally kicked in and he drifted asleep staring at the packed duffle bag in the corner of his bedroom. He could feel the deadline looming menacingly. Tears filled his eyes as he mourned the loss of his pack before it happened.

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Breakfast was normally a quiet affair now that it was just him and Yunho. Today was one of the exceptions. The entire pack had slept in the Nesting Room last night to help Wooyoung through his heat. All eight of them now crowded the small eat-in table in their kitchen, chattering incessantly.

"Here, have more," Yunho placed a second serving of rice in front of Wooyoung. The latter gave him a lazy smile in thanks, his scent fully relaxed. Reaching out mentally, Yeosang could feel the echoes of contentment through their bond. His chest tightened painfully at the haziness of the connection. He wondered if any of them had noticed the bond thinning from their ends. He couldn't imagine the bonds were thriving for them but no one had bothered to mention it. It just further reinforced his positioning in the pack. They didn't mind having him there but they also didn't seem to mind him not being there. His chest ached at the thought as he chewed without tasting.

"Thanks for the meal," he forced himself to use an upbeat tone to not ruin the mood. He stood and collected his dishes absentmindedly. Noticing Wooyoung was done with his rice bowl, he reached out to stack it with his dishes.

A growl sounded, quickly echoed by three others. He yanked his hand back, clutching it tightly to his chest as his heart dropped before picking up pace. His beta was shivering, cowering at the sounds and filling him with dread. He felt cornered as the four Alphas bared their teeth at him, growls vibrating their chests.

"S-sorry," his face grew hot again, the fear mixed with humiliation as the omegas laughed. Yeosang knew how his members were after a heat or a rut. He wasn't sure why but they did their best to bar him from touching them the next day. He'd just been lost in thought and forgotten the cardinal rule.

"Stop being mean to my Yeosanggie," Wooyoung scolded them through light chuckles, slapping Jongho's thigh in mock discipline.

Yeosang forced out a laugh of his own before excusing himself, his beta still curled up anxiously. He finished clearing his dishes with forced calmness then headed straight to his room. He needed to get out. Neither his heart nor his beta would be able to stand the stress much longer.

San

Chapter Notes

Early upload since I ended up writing a short chapter.

I decided to do this chapter from San's POV. Thinking I might mix it up with a switch between Yeosang and the other members every chapter. We'll see ig...

Anyways, you've probably noticed in the last chapter but these are not edited that well because I get a bit lazy but hopefully it's readable enough to enjoy.

San choked in agony as a sharp snap resounded in his mind. The pain was so overwhelming that it took him a moment to recognize what had caused it.

"Yeosang," he croaked.

Eyes wide with terror, he met Seonghwa's equally panicked gaze, his hand mirroring San's in the way he clutched at his chest. Seonghwa jumped to his feet without a word, making a beeline to their front door with San hot on his heels. He cursed himself for not being faster as they tore through the living room. A door opened further in their apartment as a teary eyed Mingi emerged from his room and rushed after them. The three of them rushed out of their dorm and into the stairwell. San's heart was aching but he couldn't find the strength to speak, too overwhelmed by the shock of the pain.

He just needed to see him. He needed to know he was alive.

The door to the stairwell the floor above flew open and Wooyoung, Jongho and Hongjoong ran in. None of them acknowledged each other as they raced up the steps. Their footsteps thundered in the echoey chamber, matching the pounding of San's heart. Arriving at the target floor, they poured out into the hall and came face to face with a stunned Yunho. The dancer was breathing heavily, one hand in his hair and the other on his chest. Upon seeing them, his knees gave in and he collapsed onto the carpeted floor.

"Gone," he choked out. San followed suit, no longer able to carry his own weight. His blood ran cold and he could no longer breathe.

"Yunho, what do you mean gone?" San heard Hongjoong ask through the rush of blood in his ears. Everything around him was muffled as he watched his pack-mates flounder.

"He's not in his room," Yunho seemed to notice the mistake he had made, glossy eyes wide as he probably came to terms with the fact that there was another possible cause for the broken bond. His words had pushed back the coldness that had taken over San's limbs though and gave him the strength to move again.

Wooyoung and Seonghwa had already raced to Yunho's apartment door, tapping in the code and making their way inside. Hongjoong was on his phone, pacing nervously while Mingi watched him anxiously. Jongho stood slumped against the wall, staring at the open apartment door blankly. The overwhelming mixture of all their scents made him nauseous. San's vision blurred as tears filled his eyes. Yeosang was gone. His pack bond had vanished. San prayed earnestly that Yeosang had cut it himself.

"The managers haven't heard anything either," Hongjoong's shaky voice sounded like it was coming from underwater. San gasped out a sob and slapped a hand over his mouth. They were in the hallway still. He couldn't make a scene. Dragging himself to his feet, he stumbled towards Yeosang's apartment. He could vaguely hear footsteps behind him but he couldn't care less. As he passed the threshold , he realized that he was still barefoot. He headed straight for Yeosang's room where he found Seonghwa on his knees beside the bed while Wooyoung cried next to an open drawer.

"His stuff are still here," Wooyoung hiccuped, ruffling through the clothes. The panic that had just eased spiked again.

"There's a note," Mingi announced with urgency. San's head shot up as he looked to the rapper, waiting to hear the contents.

Mingi sniffled before beginning to read.

Hi,

I'm so sorry to do this to you guys without preparing you first. I know this is going to be painful and weird but I think it'll be better for all of us in the long run. I stretched the Withering process to last four months so the break shouldn't be too painful for you guys. If it is, there's some heavy duty painkillers in my top drawer. Make sure you rest up and drink a lot. I heard broken bonds can leave you feeling pretty bad. I'll be back on Tuesday. Again, I'm really sorry to put you through this.

♡,

Yeosang

"What the actual fuck?" San breathed, his knees weakening once more. He had been killing their bonds for four months? How had he not felt it dying? He thought back to the past few months. Had he even checked on their bond? It had been so innocuous, sitting discretely in the corner of his mind. Yeosang had kept his barriers up for so long, San had stopped checking up on it.

Shakily, he sat down on the edge of Yeosang's bed. As the panic gave way to pure pain, San inhaled deeply. The space was filled with Yeosang's cherry scent. It was less tart than he was used to but still so clearly Yeosang. His scent was overwhelming, untainted and pure. Their current presence sat on his scent like oil on water. San frowned, sniffing deeper. He hadn't come to Yeosang's room much since the move. The beta hadn't really invited him over but he had assumed that he had been mingling with the rest of the pack. At the very least, he had expected Yunho's scent to permeate the space. It was just Yeosang's though.

He felt his heart shatter at this realization. His own room was a myriad of scents as the other pack members came through so frequently. Yeosang's singular scent highlighted an isolation San hadn't noticed before. Had Yeosang been planning this? He couldn't help but wonder if the space they'd given him had made things easier to do so.

"It's only him," Mingi whispered, echoing his thoughts as he hugged Jongho. He sought out Yeosang's bond and came up with just a fading nub on his end. The bond that he had been blocked from touching for so long were nothing more than withered tendrils filled with the memory of a pain so sharp it took San's breath away. Had Yeosang been hurting? Enough to break seven bonds at once?

What had he done?

A sob escaped San's mouth, no longer able to control his pain. He had tried to hold it in, taking into account the emotional state of the rest of his pack. He just couldn't anymore though. Hands were on him in seconds and then he was being embraced by the pack Alpha. Hongjoong was doing his best to emit calming pheromones but he was struggling too, San could tell. He hugged the smaller Alpha tightly, burying his face in his neck.

"I failed him," he sobbed. He should have tried harder to close the growing gap in their relationship. He'd just chalked it up to Yeosang being a beta, so different from the rest of them that his behaviour became an expected norm. He'd jokingly brushed off anything that raised warning flags with a light 'must be a beta thing' with the rest of the pack. He didn't deserve to have been in Yeosang's life.

Seonghwa breaking down tore him from his own cries. He pulled back to check on him only to be hushed by Hongjoong. "Yunho's got him," the head Alpha reassured him.

San hiccuped, doing a quick glance around the room to check on the others. Seonghwa was on the floor, clutching Yunho's shirt as he cried his heart out. Wooyoung was sitting next to the nightstand, completely disassociating while Jongho rubbed his back gently.

Mingi stood in the doorway, staring blankly at the note in his hand.

"Where could he have gone?" Mingi lips trembled but he looked determined to solve the problem.

"What if he never comes back?" Wooyoung's words made Seonghwa whimper, shaking his head vehemently.

"He's coming back. He said so." Jongho said firmly.

"We'll get him back, don't worry," Hongjoong's gaze was sharp as he looked at the broken members of his pack. The determination in his gaze made San's racing heart calm a little. They would fix this.

Yeosang

Chapter Notes

> So you've probably noticed that it says there'll be 20 chapters. This is not set in stone. It's just a guesstimate tbh 😬
>
> Also, I've decided on an update schedule. I'll be posting every Monday until I complete the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yeosang screamed into his pillow as the frayed ends of the seven bonds reached out only to find nothing. They had already begun to disintegrate, burning like they were being incinerated and making a desperate grab to rejoin the pack. It was too late though. The pack mark at the base of his neck had already faded with the distance he'd put between them. He'd needed to do this for his longterm peace but he truly hadn't been prepared for the pain of seven ties severing at once. In the haze of his pain, he finally understood why people often chose to slowly leave a pack one member at a time. He'd lost track of everything but the pain, only leaving the bed to relieve himself. He knew he needed to eat but he couldn't do more than just chug water on his toilet breaks. The sheets beneath him were soaked with sweat but he couldn't bring himself to take them off. He rolled off the edge of the bed and fell on the floor with a thud, the room blurry. The carpet beneath him was soft and dry and so he lay there, dry heaving as his stomach tried to empty itself. And then everything went dark again.

When he came to the next time, there was an odd beeping noise. The pain in his head had receded but his chest still felt unnaturally tight. No matter how deeply he breathed, there was not enough air. He groaned softly, his mouth dry but his bladder tight. He threw off his blanket, immediately distressed by the odd sensation in his hand. Sitting up, he pried his eyes open and was flooded with fluorescent light. His eyes squeezed back shut on their own volition. A door opened and he forced himself to face the light to see who it was.

"Yeosang-ah!" his mom rushed over, hands grabbing his face and working their way down his arms as she checked his condition. "Yeosang, what happened? The doctors called me and said you were found unconscious in a hotel!"

She was crying now, the relief of seeing him awake and moving too great. She kissed his forehead through her tears and hugged him tightly. Yeosang slumped into her arms and allowed his own tears to fall, seeking comfort in her embrace. It felt like forever since anyone had hugged him sincerely and so he clung to her desperately, breathing in her familiar and calming lilac scent. She rubbed his back, soothing him with soft sounds until his chest expanded a little more. He gently pulled away.

"I need to pee," he told her.

"Okay, go ahead. I'm going to get the food set up. You look like you lost weight. You need to eat when you're sick or you won't get better," she helped him off the bed and handed him the IV pole beside his bed. It was only then that he noticed he was receiving some kind of drip. With a mumbled thanks, Yeosang made his way to the bathroom and relieved himself. As he washed his hands, he gained the courage to look in the mirror. Dark circles shadowed his eyes and his cheeks looked hallow. His hair was oily and the hospital gown he wore hung loosely around him. Hating what he saw in the reflection, he turned away and headed back out to his mom.

She was seated next to the hospital bed, the tray at the foot filled with open lunchboxes. He smiled weakly at her and sat back down. She covered him with his blankets and pressed the buttons until the bed was on the perfect incline. She didn't stop fluttering about until he had taken his first bite.

His stomach started to hurt after a few more bites but he pushed on so that he wouldn't worry her further. Finally, on the verge of puking, he put his chopsticks down.

"Already?" His mom handed him a cup of water. He sipped it slowly.

"I don't think my body is ready for food," he answered. His mom sighed and smiled sadly before getting up to start closing the containers.

"What happened?" She asked softly, not making eye contact.

"I had a fever," he answered.

"At a hotel? In the same city as your dorm?" It was clear she didn't believe him.

Yeosang just shrugged, looking out the window. The sky was a mixture of pink, purple, orange and blue as the sun prepared to set.

"What day is it?" He asked. He had no idea where his phone was though he knew it must be close. It was the only way the hospital would have been able to call his mother.

"Sunday," she answered, stacking the containers and tying them back up. He hummed in response. Only two days had passed. That was better than he had expected. He had planned for five days and booked the hotel for seven in case it took longer.

"Do you know where my phone is?" Yeosang turned his attention back to her. She made an affirmative noise and dug through her purse.

"It was dead so I charged it. Your members keep calling but I didn't answer," she said, handing him the device. He took it, grateful his mom had somehow known to do so.

"How did you know?" he asked warily, surprised she hadn't said anything yet.

"The doctors said they had an unmarked beta when they called," she smiled sadly. Tears blurred his vision and he looked up to keep them from falling.

"Yeah," he said brokenly. His mom rushed over and hugged him tightly and he clung to her again.

"Do you want to tell me what's wrong?" She cooed, stroking his greasy hair. "Tell me what happened."

"It was just hard being the only beta," he sniffled, unable to tell her the uncut truth. She kissed his temple and hugged him tighter until his tears had subsided.

"I'm going to go get the doctor," she said, releasing him when he tried to pull away. "Do you want to come spend a few days with me?"

He nodded, relieved for the opportunity to just be loved on for a few days, even if it wasn't the type of love his beta needed. She left for the nurses station, leaving him with just his thoughts. He wondered what his former pack-mates were doing? Were they upset? Relieved? His mom had said they had been calling. He grabbed his phone and pressed the lock button.

The screen lit up.

His notifications were full. 386 missed calls, nearly double that in texts and 67 voicemails. Then something else caught his eye. His mom had been right, it was Sunday.

Only it was a whole week later than he had thought.

Heart thundering, he unlocked his phone and opened his email. There were messages from his lawyer and the company staff but he couldn't muster up the courage to open them. He may have left the pack but he was still a member of ATEEZ for the time being. It would take longer to sort that out but he'd put his lawyer on it the day he left. Opening the search engine, he searched his name. Articles about him being on a hiatus filled the first page.

He opened up his contact list and searched for his managers' number. His call was picked up just as his mom returned with a nurse. He apologetically held up a finger.

"Hello," he greeted nervously.

"*Kang Yeosang! What the hell? Where are you?*" his manager whisper yelled into the phone.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry," Yeosang blurted out. "I lost track of time. What's happening right now?"

"*Lost track of time? The company said your lawyer is trying to break the contract. You can't do that to us! To your members! You never even spoke to them!*" the managers voice was getting louder and so he just stuck to apologizing until he had stopped ranting.

"I'll be back tonight and we can discuss it," he told the manager.

"*Where are you? I'll send someone to get you.*"

"No, don't worry. I'll come by myself," he promised. He hung up the phone before the manager could respond. Turning his attention back to his mom and the nurse, he startled at

the group of doctors in the doorway.

"Good evening, Yeosang-ssi. I'm Doctor Kim, your attending physician," one of the doctors introduced himself. Yeosang bowed his head in greeting. The doctor approached the bed while reviewing the chart on his clipboard. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Good, thanks to you guys," Yeosang responded politely. "Will I be able to be discharged today?" he asked. He needed to get back to the dorm ASAP. He should have been more careful in planning. Ten days unaccounted for was unacceptable. Their company and Hongjoong must be livid.

"You can go home as soon as that IV finishes. You had us pretty worried. you collapsed due to malnutrition, stress, and mild dehydration due to a high fever. Thankfully, you should be fine in no time as long as you eat well and get enough rest. I'd like you to come back for follow up tests though, if possible." Dr. Kim gave him a friendly smile as he spoke, maintaining eye contact to the point that it became almost uncomfortable.

"Tests?" his mom asked, stepping closer.

Dr. Kim glanced at his mother then turned to him, silently asking for permission to disclose his information.

"You can talk in front of her," Yeosang consented.

"So, your secondary gender is marked as a beta on your ID," the doctor began. "However, and this will probably come as a shock, your blood work shows that you are actually an omega."

Yeosang laughed weakly. Dr. Kim and the surrounding doctors just looked at him with a unchanging expression. Yeosang stared at him blankly, waiting for the 'just kidding' that didn't follow.

"That's impossible," he said, sitting up straight. "I mean, I- I don't have any omega traits. No heats, no sweet scent, nothing." Yeosang could feel himself growing panicked at the reveal but he tried to remain composed.

"I know, it's very rare," the doctor nodded in agreement. "I was skeptical too. That's why we ran the test three separate times with different samples to make sure it wasn't an error."

"How is that even possible? His family doctor identified his sub-gender when he reached maturity," Yeosang's mom finally spoke up, just as shocked as he was.

"I know. Like I said, it's very rare for this to happen. His annual health checks would not have pinged it either since it's not tested for. Still, there must have been signs," Dr. Kim looked between him and his mom. "Perhaps his temperament better aligned with omega characteristics. Or his pack bonds responded better to physical touch than any other form of connection?"

His mom nodded in agreement. "We all thought he was going to present as an omega. It was pretty shocking when he didn't."

“Yeah, that’s the thing in these cases. It should have been flagged earlier,” the doctor turned back to Yeosang. “Have you been in a pack since reaching maturity?”

Yeosang nodded stiffly.

“Did you not bring up an of your concerns with your doctor? I can’t imagine your bonds were comfortable.” Dr. Kim frowned, concern etched into his aging face.

“I mentioned it briefly but he said I just needed to work on my relationship with the pack,” Yeosang swallowed dryly. Surprisingly, his mom had accepted the news relatively easily. Yeosang, on the other hand, was still reeling.

An omega?

It would definitely explain a lot of things. Yeosang couldn't help but feel cheated. He'd lived so long with an identity that he didn't connect with and to finally learn that there had been a reason for that was both validating and upsetting.

His mom's phone rang. She answered apologetically. "It's your father, I have to answer. He's been so worried," she explained before moving away to take the call.

The doctor stepped a little closer at that moment. "Yeosang-ssi," he said softly. Yeosang turned back to him.

"Yes?"

"Have you ever been sexually active?"

The question caught Yeosang off-guard and he looked between Dr. Kim and the other physicians, wondering what that had to do with anything.

"Uh, no," he answered truthfully, never one to lie to his healthcare worker.

Dr. Kim nodded, like the answer was expected. "Like I said, your case is rare but there are similar cases of omegas initially presenting as betas only to actually present as an omega after their first sexual encounter. I believe you fit into that category."

As he spoke, one of the doctors behind him scribbled notes on her clipboard. Yeosang blushed darkly, embarrassed to not only have strangers knowing his intimate history but to also document it for everyone to see.

Yeosang glanced at his mom to make sure she couldn't hear their conversation.

"I- what counts as a sexual encounter?" Yeosang asked quietly.

"Penetrative sex with an Alpha ejaculating into you," Dr. Kim answered, coughing awkwardly into his hand. Yeosang's face grew even hotter. "Once you experience that, you'll experience your first heat within a month's time. You will then become just as fertile as any other omegas so you will need to be careful. I know this is all very overwhelming but we are partnered with some organizations that could help you navigate this change."

"What kind of services?" Yeosang's mom rejoined the conversation. Dr. Kim turned and smiled at her.

"Well, he must have only taken the mandatory beta classes. He'll need to take the omega course as well now," he explained. His mom nodded in agreement.

"I see," Yeosang mumbled. "Can I go home and think about it?" All of this was so overwhelming. It still felt unreal. Was he still in the hotel room having an extremely vivid dream?

The doctor straightened up and stepped back. "Of course! I'll forward your blood work to your family doctor and when you're ready, you can go to them. They'll be able to guide you through this."

Yeosang bowed his head in thanks. The doctors returned it with small bows and smiles before they filed out after Dr. Kim.

"This was a crazy day," his mom commented quite casually, fixing his blanket to busy her hands.

"Kang Yeosang-ssi?" a new, female voice called out. Yeosang turned to the doorway where the same nurse from earlier had returned. "I'm here to take out your IV. Dr. Kim said you're ready to be discharged."

"Ah, thank you," Yeosang said awkwardly, holding his hand out for her.

"I can't come home today," he told his mom as the nurse got to pulling out his needle. "I need to go back to the dorm. Things have kind of gotten out of control."

He wasn't supposed to be gone this long. His mom sighed but nodded in understanding. "Okay, I'll drop you off."

When the nurse left, Yeosang got dressed in his clean clothes. He still smelled strongly of sweat but hadn't had a chance to shower recently. He'd packed clothes in his emergency bag but had been too disoriented to do anything during the recovery process. His mom wrinkled her nose when they were trapped in the small space of her car but said nothing. The ride home was mostly silent until they pulled into the back of the building.

"You'll call me if you need me," it wasn't a question.

He nodded and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I will," he answered anyways.

His body ached as he climbed out of the car but he ignored it. He entered through the backdoor so as to see the least amount of people and slipped into the closest stairwell. The

elevators were usually full at this time of day and he didn't want to be spotted looking or smelling like he did. So he ignored his protesting body and climbed all the way up to the 16th floor. As soon as he stepped into the living room, Yeosang's stomach clenched with nausea as fear filled him. Their scents filled the house but a singular scent had his heart beating erratically. There was no way the pack would be able to tolerate his presence at the moment. He could only imagine the very visceral reaction they would have to his presence, now that he was a real outsider.

Mingi was in heat.

Chapter End Notes

So we got some answers in this chapter as to why Yeosang was struggling. I don't know if you guys saw this coming but I kinda hope you didn't 🤭 I love a good reveal.

Also, I don't plan on making this fic explicit so, even though we have a NSFW reason for his mistaken sub-gender, I most likely will not be including anything more than an allusion to the act (at least not in the main story).

Anyways, we didn't see the rest of the pack this chapter so I'm looking forward to write more of their perspectives for the next chapter.

Thank you everyone who has been commenting. You guys make me want to keep writing 💜

Mingi

Chapter Notes

Not sure I’m satisfied with this one but I did promise every Monday so here it is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mingi sniffled. His whole body still felt much too tight to be comfortable but the intense heat that had been so overwhelming mere hours ago was finally receding. He could breathe deeply without his stomach cramping and form coherent thoughts again. He sighed softly and hugged the pillow in his arms tightly. The fruity scent filled him with both comfort and pain. He remembers nothing about the beginning of his heat except for an intense longing that had only lessened when Jongho handed him one of Yeosang’s pillows.

He missed him so much.

To this day, Mingi had spent all of his heats with something belonging to Yeosang. Sometimes it was his sheets, other times a shirt but the comfort of having Yeosang's scent so close when he was feeling that exposed and vulnerable filled him with comfort. He knew Yeosang wasn't interested in him romantically or sexually and so he always made sure to keep a distance but it had been too much to not have Yeosang close *and* be unable to touching his bond during his cycles. Thankfully, Yeosang had always been accommodating and would allow them to take items with his scent. Yeosang was far too sweet, kind and generous. He needed him as much as he needed oxygen. He reached out to the others, obsessively checking on their bonds. He'd found himself doing it every couple of hours since Yeosang left, finding comfort in their presence. Yunho and Seonghwa were asleep so he didn't get much from them. Jongho’s barriers were raised, making him whine in distress.

"What's wrong?" Hongjoong asked from behind him, spooning him carefully.

"Jongho-ya," he pleaded. The younger’s barriers were lowered immediately and he was hit with a wave of pure sorrow. The feeling was infectious and soon, everyone bond was tainted with grief.

"Sorry," Jongho mumbled, cuddling closer to Seonghwa.

"It's okay," Mingi mumbled, tightening Hongjoong's hold around him. The Alpha kissed his pack mark comfortingly.

"He's going to come back," San comforted from the opposite side of the bed. Mingi wished he could believe him.

Yeosang had promised to be back five days ago in his letter but there was still no trace of him. To make matters worse, their CEO had told them that Yeosang was trying to dissolve his

contract and leave the group as well. All of them had gone to his family home on Wednesday when he hadn't returned but his parents hadn't known Yeosang's whereabouts either. His father had promised to let them know if he heard anything but they had yet to hear any news from him. So now, following the most desolate heat he had ever experienced, the seven of them lay together in silence, wallowing in their own misery.

Mingi propped up onto his elbow abruptly, ignoring the annoyed groan Hongjoong let out. He sniffed the air deeply. Then he lowered his head to smell the fading scent in the pillow. He raised his nose to the air again. The Captain tugged at him, encouraging him to lie back down. Mingi ignored him, sniffing deeper to try and bypass the overwhelming scents in the Nesting Room. He picked up on it again, his senses heightened by his still receding heat. He slapped Hongjoong's wrist repeatedly, needing to be freed immediately.

"Get out, get out, get out," he said urgently, words matching the light taps. His heat had abated while taking Hongjoong's knot and it had deflated by now but Hongjoong hadn't been ready to let him go and demanded he remain still. Mingi had allowed it, recognizing that their head Alpha was being extra clingy since they still had no tab on Yeosang's whereabouts. But now he needed to be freed immediately.

Sensing his urgency, Hongjoong pulled out, rolling away slightly to allow Mingi to scramble to the foot of the bed. The commotion had woken the sleeping members and they were all watching him with confusion as he dashed for the bedroom door.

"Mingi, slow down, you're going to hurt youself," Seonghwa tried to coax him, sitting up. The others echoed his words, warning him to calm down but he just couldn't. He had to know if he was dreaming.

Mingi threw the door open and all the protests fell silent as Yeosang's cherry scent flooded their senses. Suddenly there was a loud commotion as the rest of the pack scrambled to get free of the multitude of sheets. Mingi rushed to the living door, finding Yeosang standing still like a deer in headlights. His eyes widened further, taking in Mingi's body before gluing themselves to the floor.

"Sorry, I didn't- I didn't mean to- I didn't know-," Yeosang stammered, taking a flustered step backwards.

By now, the rest of the pack had caught up with him and were standing close behind him. Yeosang noticed and brought a hand to his eyes, completely blocking his vision. Mingi shared a confused look with Jongho before taking in the fact that they were all undressed. He was just about to turn to grab something to cover himself when Wooyoung pushed past him.

"Hey! Kang Yeosang! Where were you?" Wooyoung broke the silence with an outraged cry. Wooyoung threw himself at the beta but Yeosang quickly stumbled back and out of his reach, eyes darting to Yunho nervously. His scent had changed from the fresh, syrupy cherry to something more familiarly tangy. Wooyoung stopped in his tracks, hands falling limply to his side as he stared at him with teary eyes, shocked by the outright rejection.

"Yeosang," Yunho's voice cracked on the second syllable. Mingi looked at him with concern, feeling the pure agony permeating from his bond. He caught Yunho's hand in his own, trying

to offer him some comfort despite his own confusion at Yeosang's behaviour. He was acting like they were a pack of rabid dogs, not people he had lived with for more than a decade. He turned back to Yeosang, studying the beta. Yeosang was still trying his best not to look in their direction. He'd turned slightly, like he was prepared to run on short notice. Most concerning was the growing tartness in his scent. Despite his familiarity with the smell, Mingi had never smelled it this strongly. He had also never seen Yeosang look so terrified.

Was that the smell of Yeosang's fear?

He'd often joked with Hongjoong that Yeosang didn't know fear. They had never smelt the very putrid scent that came with the emotion on him. When Seonghwa grew scared, his bright citrusy scent became musty. When Yunho grew scared, his grassy scent grew dirty. Whatever it was, the scent was very distinctly rancid. Yeosang's cherry scent had never been anything but pleasant, in all of its variations. Now though, seeing the very visible distress on the beta's face as he tried to avoid looking at them and pairing it with the pleasantly familiar scent of a tangy cherry, Mingi was hit with the gut wrenching epiphany that the scent he knew best was Yeosang's fear. Suddenly, Yunho's pain made sense. His knees gave in and he would have fallen if Seonghwa hadn't steadied him from behind.

He thought back to all the times he'd joined in on teasing the beta whenever the Alpha's playfully taunted him. Yeosang's scent always intensified, the tangy aroma filling the space as he blushed prettily and stuttered a lighthearted response. Mingi had enjoyed seeing the flustered expression since they rarely ever got a reaction out of him unless he was drunk or on camera. He'd thought nothing of it since betas were not easily threatened by an Alpha, especially one in their own pack. Clearly, the experience had been drastically different to their beta for some reasons. Nothing about it had been lighthearted. He had been flustered due to raw fear.

The silence seemed to weigh heavy on Yeosang as the tartness of his scent intensified. He shuffled in spot, peeking past his hand but hurriedly covering his eyes again after meeting Mingi's gaze.

"You guys want to, um, I don't know, shower and get dressed so we can talk?" Yeosang's voice was shaky as he waved a hand towards the Nesting Room.

Mingi took a step back, wanting to ease what he now recognized as anxiety in the depths of Yeosang's voice. He could feel confusion from the other members but he wanted to ease the beta's fears first. When no one else reacted, Yeosang took a cautious step backwards.

"Or..." he said weakly, "I can come back tomorrow?" He took another step backwards. That seemed to shock their brains into motion.

"No," they yelled in unison, alarming Yeosang enough for him to physically startle. The beta laughed awkwardly and straightened his posture.

"Then... do you mind if I wash up? I'm sure you can smell how sweaty I am," Yeosang's laugh sounded forced as he rubbed the back of his neck as spoke. A flash of white caught Mingi's attention. Before he could say anything, Jongho had charged towards Yeosang.

Yeosang shuffled backwards as he approached but when Jongho reached for him, he whimpered and raised both hands to protect his head. Mingi's chest tightened, the emotion mirrored in Jongho's bond as he took several steps away from Yeosang.

"Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," Jongho said hurriedly. "Sorry, I was just trying to get a closer look," the maknae pointed at Yeosang's wrist.

"You were in the hospital?" Mingi asked, feeling horrified. It would explain why he had been gone a whole week longer than he had promised. Taking into account the pain he had been in when the bond had snapped, Mingi had done research and saw that it would have been even worse for Yeosang. They had lost one bond each. Yeosang had lost seven.

"Why? What happened? Because of the broken bonds?" Wooyoung gushed, grabbing his arm to look at the band. Yeosang yanked his hand free, looking as though Wooyoung's touch had burned him.

"Please don't touch me," he said.

Mingi noticed that, although he spoke to Wooyoung, his eyes had flitted to Jongho. His heart shattered at the recognition of exactly what their teasing had done to Yeosang. He was so scared of their reaction that he wouldn't allow his longtime friend to approach him.

"I just got a fever because of the break," Yeosang explained, shrugging as though it was no big deal.

"Just? You've lost so much weight!" Hongjoong snapped, causing Yeosang to flinch almost imperceptibly.

"Hyung!" Yunho spun on their Captain, glaring at him harshly. Mingi quickly tightened his grip on him, trying to calm him down. Having two high strung Alpha's would not help Yeosang calm down at all.

"I'll answer all your questions, promise. Can we please talk after we've washed up?" Yeosang asked feebly, wrapping his arms around himself.

"Yeah, of course," Yunho quickly agreed, turning back to him with a tight smile. Hongjoong had clearly recognized that he'd missed something and so he let Yunho take the lead. Wooyoung, on the other hand, did not.

"You've been gone for 10 days!" he cried out. "I've waited long enough!"

"Wooyoung," Hongjoong and Mingi warned in tandem. Wooyoung stomped his foot childishly but stood down, sulking over to them.

"Go and wash up," Mingi said to Yeosang, albeit reluctantly. "We will too."

They were blocking the path to his room so Mingi and Yunho ushered them backwards and towards Yunho's room. The seven of them crowded into Yunho's en suite, needing to debrief during their shower time. Seonghwa and Wooyoung took the first round, stepping into the glass shower.

"What was that about?" Hongjoong asked Yunho.

"He's terrified of us," Yunho heaved out a heavy sigh, sitting on the closed toilet seat. A small smile flickered across Mingi's face as he noticed the slight flinch as the cold porcelain made contact with his skin.

"What? No! He smells normal," Wooyoung denied, looking around at the others.

"Yeah, I've never smelled fear on him," Seonghwa piped up as he shampooed his hair.

"All we've ever smelled was his fear," Mingi said, tears filling in his eyes. "We just didn't recognize it."

This seemed to throw them into chaos as they all started talking over on another. Mingi sniffled, stepping over to take Seonghwa's spot in the shower when he stepped out. He could hear them all arguing about how that wasn't possible but he was more focused on the way Wooyoung stood frozen under the shower head.

"Wooyoung?" Mingi said softly, tapping his shoulder.

"I just thought his scent was just maturing," Wooyoung whispered, his tears blending with the water. "Whenever I smelled his old scent, I thought he was just feeling happy."

"I know," Mingi said softly, not sure how else to comfort the omega. They were all being forced to face the consequences of their accidental negligence. Wooyoung sniffled but stepped out of the shower, allowing for Jongho to replace him.

Remembering Yeosang would be waiting for them, Mingi rushed through his own shower.

Chapter End Notes

> I want to write the actual conversation from Yeosang’s perspective so this chapter was kind of like a filler for me tbh. Maybe that’s why I feel like there’s something off about it but anyways, I hope YOU enjoyed it lol.

Yeosang

Chapter Notes

Without further ado…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yeosang hated how hard he was shaking as he showered. His nerves were a mess and, as usual, he couldn't control them. His beta, no, his omega was a mess. In the recent years, it had always been on edge around the others even when they were pack members. Now that they no longer had the pack bond, it was vibrating steadily with anxiety.

Being an omega was starting to make a lot more sense in his head. Yeosang could finally understand why he had felt that visceral fear. He'd gaslit himself for years but now, he knew that his omega had simply been unable to see an Alpha growling at him as anything but terrifying. Sighing, he focused on scrubbing himself and wondered what to say. He'd known he would have to come back eventually. He'd just also hoped that the broken bonds would make seeing them again less painful. Instead, he'd found himself reaching for the nonexistent threads to try and gauge their emotions and feeling even emptier when it came back empty. He took his time in the shower, delaying the inevitable.

Surprisingly, his room smelled of the members for the first time when he entered it. He could count on one hand the times his members had come into his room before so to find their scents in it now was a bit overwhelming. He opened the windows and tried not to imagine them sitting in here while he was gone. He wasn't sure why they would have come in to be honest. Had they missed him? Was it more bearable to be around his scent without him there? Had they needed to borrow something one after another? His brain came back useless and so he pushed it away.

Opening his closet, he picked out clothes at random. Reaching past his clothes into the depth of his closet, he carefully pulled out a blue stuffed bunny. He'd won it at an arcade when he had been in high school and had become extremely attached to it. Sitting on the floor in just briefs, he rubbed the ears between his thumb and forefinger, the softness grounding him. He sat with it for a moment longer before he slipped it back into its spot and finished getting dressed.

Now in clean clothes, he headed to the living room cautiously. The other seven were already sitting down, silently waiting. All seven of them had squeezed onto the sectional. Hongjoong was seated in Seonghwa's lap, his face buried in Seonghwa's neck, nuzzling into his scent gland. It was a habit of their Captain whenever things got stressful. Seeing the visible reaction to his presence had Yeosang's stomach growing even tighter. Their intermingled scents had always being a reminder of his status as the outsider but witnessing it today made it hurt more. Next to them, Mingi, Wooyoung, Yunho and Jongho were plastered together.

There was still room on the oversized couch as all but one were sitting super close to one another. San had chosen to stand by the window, looking outside. The familiar scent of freshly cut grass dominated the space. Yeosang quickly recognized the cause as everyone being dressed in Yunho's clothes.

Yeosang chose the armchair furthest from the sectional. It was always best to stay away from the pack after a cycle. They became unpredictably volatile. Everyone's eyes fell on him, a mixture of pained and pitying expressions staring at him.

When no one seemed to be prepared to break the silence, Yeosang sat up straighter and steeled himself. "First of all, I want to apologize. I'm sorry for being gone so long. It was my fault for not being better prepared." Yeosang tried to keep an amicable expression on his face as he spoke. "I know it was incredibly irresponsible of me but I really had planned to be back before the ATEEZ activities resumed. Recovery took a few more days than I'd expected."

No one said anything. The silence was deafening. The looks of pity began to make way for rage as all the scents in the room grew thicker. Yeosang grew increasingly anxious the stronger their scents became. Needing to appease them, he nervously stood up and bowed at a 90 degree angle.

"Sorry, please forgive me, I'm sorry," he bowed with each apology, turning to make sure he'd directed a bow to all the members.

"Yeosang, what the actual fuck?" Seonghwa snapped, causing him to flinch. He froze halfway, staring at the oldest member warily. Though he may be an omega, Seonghwa's authority came second to only Hongjoong. As such, Seonghwa's sentiments were usually shared within the group. Slowly, he straightened his back.

"Sor-"

"Stop apologizing," Hongjoong interrupted, rubbing his face roughly. Yeosang shut his mouth, pursing his lips together to hold back from apologizing for apologizing. The eyes of his members bore holes into him and he felt dangerously exposed. Eyes stinging, he looked down again.

"Why?" Jongho broke the silence with a thick voice. Yeosang glanced at him before looking back down sadly after seeing the dejected expression on the maknae. He must have struggled with the adjustments to fill the gaps Yeosang had left behind. Guilt gnawed at his stomach. The young Alpha already carried so much of the team on his shoulders. Yeosang's absence would have only added to his load.

"I really didn't mean to. I- it was-," Yeosang couldn't hold back the shudder as he remembered his time in the hotel. "I unfortunately lost track of time while the bonds dissolved," he said shortly, echoes of the searing pain still lingering.

"It must have hurt so much," Mingi sniffled, interlocking his fingers with Seonghwa's for comfort. "Who was taking care of you?"

"It was fine, my mom helped me," Yeosang lied to spare the omega's feelings. He may have been an outsider to them now but that didn't mean they wanted to see him suffer. He knew they would be upset if they learned he had dealt with it alone. A part of him wanted to tell them, to allow himself be comforted by them. He could already feel the ghost squeeze of San's arms.

That would only blur the lines though. And, to be quite honest, he didn't think he could afford to go back to the way things were. He had long accepted the fact that they were only platonically interested in him and, perhaps someday that would be okay. Right now though, he needed to heal first. He could not have them constantly touching his open wounds. He needed to keep his distance.

"Don't lie," Wooyoung snapped, jumping to his feet. "You think we didn't call your mom? She had no idea where you were either."

Yeosang flinched but remained silent. Deny, deny, deny.

Or just shut up.

"I meant why did you run away?" Jongho corrected himself, leaning forward to prop his elbow on his knees. This new position made his gaze all the more intense.

Yeosang was confused. Run away? He'd left them a note before leaving. Yes, he had been late to return but he'd still come back as soon as he could. Or was Jongho referring to his lawyer trying to cancel his contract with KQ? Were they upset he was trying to leave ATEEZ without discussing it with them first?

"I wouldn't say run away..., I guess I just thought that if I was leaving the pack, I should leave ATEEZ too," Yeosang explained with an awkward shrug. It made the most sense. Things would undoubtedly be awkward between them, more so than before. Their fans already nitpicked their behaviour currently. He couldn't imagine going out there day after day without the pack connection. He could already imagine the video compilations.

"Fuck ATEEZ!" San exploded, spinning sharply to glare at him. Yeosang held his breath, lowering his gaze and stilling himself so as not to make any sudden movements to further upset the already aggravated Alpha.

San took a loud, deep breath and dropped into the last space on the couch. Yeosang exhaled with him. "No one is talking about ATEEZ, Yeosang. We're asking why you left the pack." San said through clenched teeth.

Yeosang blinked.

He slowly lifted his head, mind blank. He'd known they would be upset about him leaving but he hadn't thought it would be about the pack. He'd expected their careers to take precedence. His existence in the pack hadn't been very noteworthy. He had just be an extra, still in the pack because they had debuted together. ATEEZ, however, was built off of their eight names. Him leaving would definitely damage the group financially if not done carefully and he'd come prepared to deal with that outcome. If it wasn't about the band, perhaps the

broken bonds had been too difficult to handle. He felt like he himself had barely survive it. It must have been bad.

"Did it hurt a lot?" His question was met with a moment of silence.

"We should be the ones asking you that," Seonghwa said bitterly. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Yeosang nodded quickly, hating the look of distress on Seonghwa's face. "I-I'm fine," Yeosang rushed to appease him. "I let it Wither."

"Do you know how dangerous what you did is? I thought you died!" Wooyoung was crying again, leaning into Yunho's arms. The Alpha held him close, rubbing his arm soothingly.

Yeosang's eyes widened and he jumped to his feet, taking a hesitant step towards Wooyoung. He hadn't considered that possibility. He'd been too distracted. "I left a note," he choked out.

Yunho gently patted the blubbering omega's head in his stead.

"It's still dangerous. You were hospitalized!" Hongjoong pointed out, gesturing at his wrist. Yeosang had torn off the band in the shower but he still covered his wrist with his other hand.

"Mild fever. I was there for just a day," Yeosang argued meekly, hugging his wrist to his chest.

"Forget it. Let's remake the bonds," Jongho demanded.

Yeosang paled and stepped back, forgetting about the chair behind him. He fell into it and stared at them in horror. He couldn't. He knew he couldn't.

He also wasn't sure he could deny them. Yeosang's hand flew to his neck, covering the marking spot.

"You can't just break them without a discussion," Yunho's agreement scared him further. If all of them agreed, wouldn't he be outnumbered?

"Why?" Yeosang whispered, hugging himself. "It hurts too much."

He hated himself so much. Why was he so weak? He just needed to say no. It wasn't that hard. He couldn't do it though. He knew he would never be able to refuse them if it came down to it. "Please don't make me. Please."

"It hurt?" Seonghwa was suddenly kneeling beside him. "What hurt? The bonds?"

Yeosang nodded, curling into himself tighter to avoid touching Seonghwa. He didn't want to trigger one of the Alpha's accidentally, especially considering he wasn't in the pack anymore. If they'd growled at him while he was a member, he could only imagine their reactions now would be more severe.

Logically, he knew it would be different if he were to join the pack again. He knew the cause behind his suffering after all. When they learned of his newly discovered sub-gender, the

Alpha's would take extra care to nourish his bonds. But he didn’t want that. He didn't want them to feel obligated to provide the physical connections he would need knowing it was not something they were interested in doing. Yes, Hongjoong would scent his wrist every morning but that was a basic pack Alpha duty. And yes, San enjoyed catching him off guard with kisses on camera but that was to play up their group dynamics. If he were to rejoin them, every touch would remind him that he was a chore to them; something that just needed to be done.

He was pulled out his thoughts when Seonghwa reached out for his hand. He pulled his hand away and awkwardly got out of the chair, giving Seonghwa as wide a berth as he could manage.

"Please don’t," he glanced at San and then Hongjoong. He was surprised to find both of them string at him like he’d grown a second head. Their confusion baffled him further so he just went with what he knew to be the law.

No touching the omegas after a heat; no touching any of them after a rut.

He could still smell Mingi's heat so he wasn't taking any chances, even if Yeosang wasn't the one initiating the contact.

"Yeosang-ah," Yunho called softly. "No one is going to get mad if you touch them."

Despite his reassuring words, Yeosang could hear the underlying tension in it. So he just nodded, pretending with him. If it bothered Yunho to just speak the lie, he really didn't want to come face to face with the consequences. His heart was too fragile to take it right now.

"What? Touch who? The boys? Why would he be worried about that?" San asked, looking around in confusion. Yeosang stood still, completely out of his depth. He looked to Yunho helplessly, his dormmate looking back with gentle eyes. It made Yeosang even more uneasy.

“Oh.” Hongjoong's eyebrows flew up as he seemed to suddenly understand. "Yeosang, baby, it's not like that, I promise."

Yeosang's brain short circuited. He nodded reflexively. *Baby*?

"I'm serious. You can touch any of us. It was never like that. We were just teasing you," Hongjoong said desperately. His conviction had Yeosang pausing and glancing around the room. The others looked equally as distressed.

He wasn't stupid; he knew it had something to do with how he left. But what was their end goal if it wasn't their careers? Did they really just want him back in the pack? He pushed that thought away as soon as it surfaced. There was no room for optimism right now. It would only shatter his heart when he ended up being wrong.

"I know," he lied blatantly. Seonghwa stepped closer and Yeosang moved back again, a tight smile on his lips. He felt like he was being tested but there was no right answer. Seonghwa continued to advance even after his back had hit the window.

"I'll stay in ATEEZ," he blurted, hands outstretched. Seonghwa froze and so he continued, feeling like he'd finally found the answer they wanted to hear. "I'll stay," he breathed. "I know I'm too intertwined in our storyline and if I leave now it'll ruin it. I'll tell my lawyers that I'll stay until the company can write me out naturally, okay?" Yeosang blabbered. Seonghwa frowned and stalked up to him.

"Sang-ah," Seonghwa said softly, wrapping his arms around Yeosang's neck, hugging him tightly. Yeosang tensed, hands held far away from Seonghwa as he stared at Hongjoong to gage his reaction. The Captain was watching with the same tight expression he'd had since the conversation had started.

"I'm so sorry," Seonghwa murmured, nuzzling his neck affectionately. He accidentally grazed against Yeosang's scent gland. Yeosang gasped, not used to the very intimate sensation. It somehow filled him with both nausea and arousal. He pushed Seonghwa away, forgetting his own strength and using more force than necessary. The omega fell backwards, landing heavily on his behind with a pained grunt. Jongho rushed to his side, crouching beside him.

"Are you okay, hyung?" he asked. Seonghwa nodded.

"Sorry, sorry," Yeosang's hands hovered in the air, wanting to help Seonghwa up but too wary to touch him. "I didn't mean to hurt him, I'm sorry. I- he just- my scen- I didn't mean to."

"Don't worry about hyung," San said softly. "He said he's fine."

"He’s fine," Wooyoung repeated, approaching Yeosang. "What about our Yeosanggie?"

Yeosang short circuited again. It wasn’t odd for any of them to use the possessive pronoun when talking about him. Something about hearing it now though made his heart falter though. When he came back online, Wooyoung was just a step away. He took tor last step and grabbed Yeosang’s wrists gently. Yeosang tried to tug free, his anxiety growing stronger. Wooyoung tightened his grip.

It’s not safe, it’s not safe, it’s not safe. Yeosang pulled harder, panicked gaze flying to the nearest Alpha. Yunho averted his gaze.

"Sang-ah," Wooyoung craned his neck, pushing his way into Yeosang’s line of sight. "It's okay. Look, they’re not mad.” Yeosang tucked both hands behind his back the second Wooyoung released him but the latter didn’t step away, instead catching Yeosang’s jaw in his right hand. He forced him to look towards Jongho.

Wooyoung was touching him but no one had growled yet. That somewhat eased his frayed nerves. Heart still racing, he did his best to push past his panic and see what his friend was trying to show him. He took in the scene before him, trying to use his brain only and ignore his anxious bet- omega.

Seonghwa was still sprawled on the floor, staring up at him with quivering lips and pained eyes. Jongho was crouched next to him, arms wrapped around his shoulders but his eyes were trained on Yeosang. Mingi stood behind them, cheeks glistening with fallen tears. San was perched on the edge of the couch, face buried in his hands while he peeked out through his

fingers. Hongjoong stood off to the side a bit, hands behind his back as his gaze matched the guilty look in San's eyes. Lastly, Yunho had inched closer, now towering over him with complete disregard for his personal space. His leafy scent was still extremely muddied as he emanated pure sadness from his eyes.

Wooyoung guided his gaze back to himself, looking up at him through moist lashes.

"See? You're fine. No one here would ever knowingly hurt you." Wooyoung said earnestly. Yunho murmured his agreement, pushing Yeosang's hair away from his forehead. Yeosang nodded again. This time though, part of him believed it. For the first time in forever, he felt like he was with the people he knew before their secondary gender presentations. He took in a deep shaky breath and nodded again.

"Good," Wooyoung smiled sadly.

Yeosang heart beat thumped against his chest. Once, twice, three times. No.

“Yeosang?” Yunho’s voice was muffled as Yeosang’s anxiety skyrocketed. Yeosang choked on an inhale.

Not now.

Yeosang struggled to breathe as his panic attack hit full force. He clenched his fists to try and control the extreme trembling but the tremors just wracked his body even harder. He couldn’t breathe. He was going to die. His chest was too tight and his arms were tingling. It hurt. Was it a heart attack? Oh my God, he was dying.

“Kang Yeosang,” Wooyoung squeezed his cheeks harshly, forcing him to focus.

“I can’t breathe,” he hyperventilated, taking short sharp breaths that did nothing to fill his lungs. Wooyoung grabbed his hand, unravelling his fist and placed it on his chest.

“I know, I know. But you’re fine, I promise. Just breathe with me.” Wooyoung said firmly. He took a deep breath, his chest expanding under Yeosang’s fingertips. He tried following but his breaths were still too short. Wooyoung didn’t stop though. He continued to breathe, slowly and calmly.

“Good, you’re doing great,” Yunho praised when Yeosang successfully matched one of Wooyoung’s breaths.

Yeosang remained focus, looking at Wooyoung’s relaxed face as he breathed. Everything was fine. It was just a delayed anxiety attack. He’s not dying. He was fine. As his breathing slowed, he became hyperaware of the cold sweat he had broken out into. His skin felt chilled and clammy. Yeosang could feel the thump of Wooyoung’s heartbeat against his palm, slow and strong. His eyelids fluttered as he focused on the feeling of Wooyoung's chest expanding with each breath. "That’s it, just breathe,” Wooyoung murmured.

Yeosang held Wooyoung's soft gaze as he continued to match his breaths. As his breathing began to regulate, and the irrational haze of fear receded, Yeosang felt the tension he had

been carrying since entering the dorm release. With this release, he was suddenly hit with a strong urge to cry. His lower lip started to tremble.

"There we go," Wooyoung praised as tears filled his eyes. "Let it out, he encouraged. "We've got you."

Yeosang sniffled and shook his head, shame overwhelming him.

"Sang-ah," Hongjoong spoke up. Yeosang startled. He hadn't realized the Captain had gotten so close but he was suddenly right beside him. "Tell hyung what's wrong, hmm? Tell hyung and I'll fix it," he promised earnestly. The words had his tears overflowing, spilling down his cheeks. He covered his mouth to stifle a sob.

"It's okay, just tell us. You used to tell me everything," Wooyoung coaxed, stroking the hand on his chest. Yeosang's bit his lip harshly, trying to regain some semblance of control as his heart begged to let go. He wanted to talk about it; had wanted to for years. He just hadn't been able to bring himself to speak up, worried about coming off as bitter or ungrateful.

Yeosang wiped his cheek. "It's nothing, it's just- It's a little hard."

"What's hard?" Yunho asked, tucking a strand of hair behind Yeosang's ear. When it fell back out, he repeated the motion. The sensation was so soothing that Yeosang wanted to lean into it.

"Being with you guys but not- not being with you guys." Yeosang wasn't sure how else to phrase it without completely baring his soul. He was terrified of telling them how he felt about them, especially considering there were seven different opportunities to be turned down.

"Not be with us?" Wooyoung asked, frowning deeply. "Yeosang, we always want you around. *I* always want you around. We're forever, you and me. Don't you know that?"

"I-," Yeosang dropped his head. Wooyoung's words warmed his tender heart but it also bewildered him. If they had wanted him around, they sure had an interesting way of showing it.

When Yeosang had moved out, he'd noticed a drastic shift in his relationship with the members. Whereas before, they had been friends, they had become coworkers. They would spend an amicable time together during work hours and then go their separate ways. Every now and then, he would approach a few of them to go out for dinner or something else mediocre but no one ever approached him unless they were abroad. After months of hearing that Yunho and Wooyoung had spent the night gaming or that Jongho and Seonghwa had gone out for drinks, Yeosang took the hint and stopped asking them as well.

"I'm sorry I ever made you feel like I didn't want to be with you," Yunho grabbed his face with both hands, forcing him to look up. "We love you to death. This pack isn't a pack without you. 8 makes 1 isn't only for ATEEZ, you know that, right?"

Yunho was looking at him so earnestly that he couldn't convince himself it was all empty words. Yeosang was also far too embarrassed to correct him and tell them that wasn’t exactly what he had meant. When his lips started trembling again, he pursed them tightly and nodded

Chapter End Notes

Confession: I’m already forgetting what I’ve already written 🫣

I’ve skimmed what I previously wrote but I might have missed something so if you notice any discrepancies, look away (point them out).

I hope you enjoyed the chapter ♥🖤🤍💚

Hongjoong

Chapter Notes

> I cannot even say how challenging this chapter was for me 😭😭 I think I rewrote it in it's entirety like 4 times and I'm still not a 100% satisfied but I got a deadline to meet so 😩
>
> Here's our Captain's P.O.V

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the years, Hongjoong had learned that sometimes, it was best to lay low and simply observe. Acting without a plan usually had rarely ever yielded the results he hoped for and so he stuck to that. Since Yeosang's return, Hongjoong had been focusing more than ever before. He needed to know the problem in order to figure out the solution.

There were quite a few issues that had arisen so far. At the top, of course, was Yeosang's fear. He had lost trust in the pack at some point, so Hongjoong needed to find a way to bridge that wariness. Secondly, though they had not intended it, the pack had managed to make Yeosang feel unwanted. This was going to be challenging to fix without regaining Yeosang's trust. Hongjoong feared that anything they said to remedy it would just feel placating to the younger. None of this was going to be an easy fix though, so the first course of action was to just convince Yeosang to give them another chance.

To start, he needed to get the pack under his control. Yeosang was clearly overwhelmed and his pack had a singular braincell being shared between the seven of them.

Having noticed that Yeosang seemed to respond best to Yunho and Wooyoung's gentle but firm approach, Hongjoong decided he needed to take a page out of their book. Even now, Yeosang hadn't pulled away from the tall Alpha, instead just staring up at him with a small pout. His scent had sweetened again now that his anxiety attack had passed but Hongjoong could still see the slight tremble of his hands. With Yeosang's full attention on Yunho, Hongjoong turned to the others.

"Behave," he warned discretely, looking specifically at San and Jongho. They both nodded in acknowledgement.

"Alright," he said a little louder, catching the trio by the window's attention. "I think we have a lot to discuss. How about we get comfortable for this?" Hongjoong phrased it as a question but, as expected, it was taken as a directive. The group shuffled around, taking their respective seating. Yeosang glanced at him nervously before making his way back to his armchair.

Taking in Yeosang's still disheveled form, Hongjoong remembered there was something else he needed to do. When Mingi has suffered from anxiety attacks, Hongjoong remembered that it would take him a few minutes for the adrenaline to subside. He had usually needed help a little help grounding himself after them. Hongjoong wasn't sure what would help Yeosang but headed to the kitchen anyways. Hopefully cool water would help regulate him a bit.

He returned to the living room with a cold bottle of water and offered it to Yeosang. Yeosang glanced at him oddly but took the uncapped bottle from. Hongjoong waited until Yeosang had taken a sip before stepping back.

Ignoring the space Jongho had clearly left for him on the sectional, Hongjoong headed towards the second armchair. He needed to get rid of the visual divide: the "me vs. them" that Yeosang seemed to see when it came to the pack. Hongjoong cleared his throat.

"For starters, as much as we would like you to rejoin the pack, no one is going to force you to do so. It's entirely your choice." Hongjoong was devastated that he had to spell this out but Yeosang's reaction earlier made him deem it a necessity. He wanted Yeosang to understand that his voice mattered, no matter what. "You're invaluable to all of us and we want you close in whatever capacity you're willing to be."

"But-." The heated glare Hongjoong shot at Jongho had the younger Alpha's mouth snapping shut. He ducked his head dejectedly.

"I- umm..., thank you?" Yeosang said slowly.

He seemed unsure but Hongjoong was fine with that. He just needed to make sure that Yeosang heard them today. Maybe later, their words would carry more weight.

"Do you mind telling us why you decided to leave the pack?" Hongjoong could tell Yeosang wasn't expecting that question. His mouth opened and closed as he tried to figure out how to respond. The longer Yeosang took to respond, the surer Hongjoong became that whatever he said next would need to be taken with a heavy dose of skepticism.

After a long moment of squirming, Yeosang said, "It was uncomfortable."

Too vague.

"Uncomfortable how?" Hongjoong pressed, tone still extremely gentle.

Yeosang floundered again, gaze darting around the room. He was definitely hiding something and, whatever it was, it was big. Hongjoong looked to Seonghwa for assistance.

"Yeosang-ah, look at me," Seonghwa spoke up immediately. Hongjoong was so grateful for the omega, especially in times like this. He wasn't sure where the group would be if it weren't for their synchronicity in moments like this. Yeosang's eyes flickered to Seonghwa but quickly moved away.

Seonghwa let out an exasperated chuckle. "Sang-ah," he called again, his tone still very casual and light. Yeosang looked at him again, this time holding his gaze. His cheeks had

taken on that pretty pink tinge they were all so obsessed with, causing Seonghwa to smile slightly.

"You said it hurt, yes?" As soon as the question left Seonghwa's mouth, Yeosang had looked away again. "Was it the bonds that hurt?"

Hongjoong's eyebrow's shot up at Seonghwa's line of questioning. His bond? Why would they hurt? Still, trusting Seonghwa came easy and so he focused his attention on Yeosang's reaction.

The younger had lowered his head and was staring at his feet. From his angle, Hongjoong had a perfect view of Yeosang's side profile. The beta's eyes seemed to have a glossy sheen to them. Yeosang laughed dryly and shook his head, rubbing his face briskly. It was a split second but Hongjoong saw it. He'd watched a tear fall from Yeosang's eye and land silently on his leg before Yeosang had wiped away any sign of it. His heart clenched painfully. How many times had Yeosang cried secretly right under their noses?

"I don't fit into this pack," Yeosang said with a stiff smile, as though he was simply stating a fact.

"Of course you fit in," Mingi quickly refuted.

"How could you not fit in?" Jongho scoffed. "There isn't even a requirement. You just have to be you."

"In what way?" Hongjoong asked instead of denying what Yeosang considered to be a truth. He wanted to nitpick the beta's mind so he could figure out exactly where they had diverged.

Yeosang shrugged and gestured to them, as though that answered the question. Getting information out of Yeosang was like plucking teeth sometimes. Hongjoong sighed louder than he had intended. Yeosang glanced at him timidly then ducked his head.

"You guys are all together," Yeosang said into his chest.

Hongjoong's eyebrows shot up with surprise.

Somehow, no matter how well he thought he knew Yeosang, he still managed to be surprised by him. He knew Yeosang. He knew he was non confrontational. He knew he remained quiet, even when others had wronged him. He knew how hard he worked to not be seen as a weak link in ATEEZ. He also knew how deeply Yeosang loved. He knew he was the type to put everyone else's needs before him. He knew how eager he was to please others. He knew all of this but, somehow, he had still managed to miss Yeosang's yearning. Those five words were said with such hopelessness that Hongjoong almost jumped out of his seat to reassure the visual. A quick glance at the others showed they were equally as surprised by the confession

In all honesty, Hongjoong was surprised the rest of the pack had made it this far without coming clean to Yeosang. He himself had always been secretly obsessed with the visual. The first time he ever laid eyes on him, he'd actually choked on air. Yeosang's beauty had stunned him but it had been his heart that had won him over in a matter of weeks. His sweet

innocence and gentle nature had been a beacon of light during his most difficult days. Those feelings never left, he had just learned to tame it over the years. So much of his time in their early career days had been focused on surviving; everything else had taken the backseat. Debuting from a small company meant they had to work themselves to the bone to achieve any kind of result. It had taken him years to even put a name to those feelings.

Hongjoong knew the others had similar stories. They were an anomaly, the seven of them. To have all of them feel the same way towards one another was undoubtably abnormal. Add to the fact that they also shared that same affection towards Yeosang and they made for quite the odd pack. Of course, some of them gravitated towards others every now and then but never in a way that had made the others feel less loved.

Except they had.

Hongjoong could now see the damage that had been festering beneath their easy, jovial relationship for years. Yeosang had been suffering in silence over something they could have fixed with one conversation. It wasn't Yeosang’s fault though. No, all of the blame lay squarely on Hongjoong's shoulders. He was their pack Alpha. He should have noticed.

Would Yeosang even believe him if he told him that he had always been a part of their togetherness? It was customary for Wooyoung to try and convince them every couple of months that he could successfully seduce Yeosang without scaring him off. San took every opportunity handed to him in the public eye to hug, kiss or dote on the beta. Mingi could not spend a singular heat without begging for them to bring Yeosang to him. Unbeknownst to him, the beta actually had all of them wrapped around his little finger. They hadn't taken any liberties with their emotions though.

He was a beta after all. Beta's were far more independent than Alphas and omegas. They preferred to be left to their own devices. Over 90% of beta's ended up mating with another beta since the relationships outside of their sub-gender became too taxing long term. Flings were common but it was very rare to see beta's settle down outside of their sub-gender. There were too many complications for them. Alpha's were overbearing and omegas too acquiescent. Thankfully, they had no issues being in larger packs since their bonds relied on having a solid emotional connection. Hongjoong had always tried to foster a welcoming, loving and non-judgmental space for all of his pack and so he had never really tried to do much more for Yeosang, not wanting to hover too much. Since Yeosang didn't seek him out often, he had assumed his needs were being met.

Besides, Yeosang was very particular about the forms of affection he could tolerate. He was fine with them touching him, but he hated more intimate forms of affection like kissing, cuddling and scenting. He was also quite introverted and preferred to spend his time holed up in his room. When they had shared bedrooms, it had been easier to be around him since his room was a shared space. Hongjoong had lost count of the times he's entered his room, pretending to be there to talk to Wooyoung of Jongho in order to be around him. When they had all moved out though, Yeosang's room became much more isolated. He hadn't realize the extent until the day their bond had broken. It had been so jarring to walk into the room and smell just his cherry scent.

The pack had all kept their mouths shut though, doing their best to not muddy the water and make Yeosang uncomfortable. They didn't have a catalyst like their heats and ruts had been to help them push past the moment of vulnerability. Hongjoong often wondered where they would be if they hadn't had their cycles to push them together. Would anyone have ever confessed? Lost in his thoughts, Hongjoong hadn't noticed how quiet the room had gotten until Yeosang started rambling.

"That's not to say that I have to- I mean I'm not trying... to make you- It's just a bit lonely seeing- not that I don't love that you guys have each other. I'm really happy for you. I just mean to say that, you know, some space- Yeah, I need some space to sort myself out and the bonds were holding me back," Yeosang slumped back in his seat, looking defeated.

"Okay, but that still doesn't answer the question of why your bonds had hurt," Jongho spoke up, bringing them back from Yeosang's deflection. "It shouldn't have hurt at all."

Yeosang looked increasingly nervous, squirming in his seat. Jongho was right; it shouldn't have hurt. His bonds had of course felt different from the others but that only made sense. His own bonds with the omegas felt vastly different than his bonds with the Alphas. Yeosang's bonds often reminded him of his previous bonds with his own parents, a beta pair. Nothing had been out of the ordinary. Hongjoong tried to focus on the facts again.

Yeosang had been scared of the Alphas reactions to touching the omegas.

Yeosang no longer trusted them.

Yeosang's bonds had hurt.

Yeosang's bonds had hurt.

"Did all of your bonds hurt?" Seonghwa asked after a moment of deliberation. Hongjoong straightened up. He had no idea how Seonghwa had come to this hypothesis so quickly but he was extremely grateful. He kept quiet as Seonghwa continued to prod.

Yeosang shrugged, looking down at his hands as he toyed with his shirt again.

"Was it the Alpha bonds?" Seonghwa asked with a slight quiver to his voice. Yeosang froze for a moment before shrugging again. Hongjoong's stomach twisted.

"Fuck," Hongjoong breathed.

"What? Why?" Yunho asked, leaning forward to look at Seonghwa better. "Why would it hurt?"

"Yeosang, did it ever not hurt?" Hongjoong asked slowly, terrified of what Yeosang's response would be. Yeosang hesitated before nodding. Blood rushed loudly through Hongjoong's ears.

"When did it not hurt?" He could hear the fear in his own voice as he dreaded Yeosang's response.

Yeosang shrugged again, refusing to look up.

There it was. The last piece of this God forsaken puzzle.

"Fuck," Hongjoong was on his feet, needing to move before he lost his mind. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," he chanted, hands gripping at his hair as he paced the space. There was no way. It couldn't be. If Yeosang was really an omega, then...

"What? What's wrong?" San was already by his side, worriedly touching his shoulder gently. Hongjoong shrugged him off. This was not the time to be receiving comfort. He had to get real answers. He spun around, stalking towards Yeosang.

"Come on, let's go to the ER."

San stepped out of his way immediately.

"What happened?" Wooyoung asked, also on his feet looking absolutely bewildered.

"Hyung, what's wrong?" Jongho panicked with him but Hongjoong didn't have the energy to respond. He would get his answers and he would get them now. Hongjoong grew nauseous as he remembered the state of Yeosang's bond. If Yeosang was an omega, then Hongjoong deserved to die. Preferably in the most painful manner possible. How many years would Yeosang have had to put up with such excruciating bonds? Had he even been able to sleep?

He grabbed Yeosang's arm, tugging him out of the chair. The younger just looked at him in bewilderment but Hongjoong paid him no heed, simply pulling him towards the door.

"Jongho, go grab my car keys please." Hongjoong told the young Alpha. Jongho looked just as confused but still followed them to the door.

"Hyung, what's wrong? Why the hospital?" Yunho stepped in front of them, blocking their path. Coming face to face with Yunho's alarmed expression, Hongjoong was reminded that he needed to remain level headed. He had a responsibility to protect his pack, and that included ensuring their emotional wellbeing. He had failed Yeosang so miserably but he could still help them. He took a deep, grounding breath.

"His bond hurt, Yunho. It hurt. But not all the time." Hongjoong stared at Yunho as he waited for the recognition to light up his eyes. When it didn't, he added "I'm willing to put good money on the fact that it didn't hurt whenever me or you, San or Jongho were touching him."

Yunho's brows furrowed for a moment before his eyes widened and his mouth popped open. "That's impossible," he breathed out.

"Exactly," Mingi agreed. "Only omegas feel the strain on a bond like that."

Yeosang tugged at Hongjoong's grip gently but the motion went almost entirely unrecognized. He just tightened his hold. He needed to get Yeosang to a doctor immediately. If Yeosang had been an omega this entire time, then that means he had spent this entire time in utter agony. All they had done was treat him the way they knew most betas wanted but that was basically the opposite of what an omega would have needed. And, taking into

consideration both his innate personality type as well as the inherent qualities of an omega, it was not in Yeosang's nature to make a fuss out of it.

"It didn't hurt on my end," Wooyoung backed him up.

"You're an omega," Hongjoong said, patting his pockets searchingly. "Jongho, I need my wallet too. Please run downstairs quickly." Hongjoong tried to order calmly but he knew he had failed by the grimace on San's face. He hoped he was wrong. He needed to be wrong, for Yeosang's sake.

"On your table, right?" Jongho asked, as he shoved his feet into his shoes.

"Hongjoong-hyung," Yeosang tugged again, this time harder. Hongjoong turned to him, his brain finally noticing it was the second time.

"Yes? What's wrong?" he asked the suspected omega. Everyone else had silenced as well and were looking at him as well. Yeosang squirmed under the attention.

"I don't need- we don't need to go to the hospital," Yeosang said tightly, tugging at Hongjoong's grip again. He freed him this time, raising his hand instead.

"It's okay," Hongjoong pet the side of his head. He hadn't controlled his own emotions and had further stressed the younger man. "We're just going there to do a quick blood test, okay?"

Yeosang's countenance tightened and he stepped back, breaking free of Hongjoong's touch.

"It's okay, there's no need." Yeosang sighed, turning to call out to the maknae who had just opened the front door. "Jongho-ya, come back. I did a blood test already," Yeosang confessed guiltily.

Hongjoong's jaw dropped.

"What? When? " Hongjoong asked, heart thundering. Yeosang hadn't said anything to them about his sub-gender. Had Seonghwa been wrong? Hongjoong thought back to earlier, when Seonghwa had first asked what he meant by the bonds hurting. Yeosang had teared up and diverted the conversation. There was no way he was wrong.

"Earlier today," Yeosang fidgeted with the hem of his pants.

He knew. He just hadn't wanted to tell them.

"And?" Jongho pressed after a long moment of nothing. Hongjoong wanted to close his ears. His heart was sitting low in his stomach. Yeosang didn't want to tell them something so life altering. Hongjoong had realized this earlier but to see Yeosang's distrust laid out so blatantly hurt far more than he'd expected.

Clearly still not ready to tell them, Yeosang just shrugged again.

Chapter End Notes

Ahhh things are finally coming to light! I hope Hongjoong's POV softened your hearts to the pack. They mean well, they're just a bit slow lol.

Anyways, now that the cat is out, hopefully I can stop breaking my own heart and write a bit of comfort.

Thanks for all the comments and kudos ♥♥ I really enjoy the feedback. I hope you all have a great week and I'll hopefully see you back here next week, same time 😘

Yeosang

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday! I hope you guys enjoy the chapter 😘

Also, please give a warm welcome my new beta reader, chimchimandsuga 💜💜

Thank you, darling, it's been a pleasure 🤎

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yeosang kicked his sheets, thrashing in frustration as his phone alarm went off.

It was already 8 AM and he had not slept a wink all night. His brain simply wouldn't turn off, instead replaying the conversation with the pack from yesterday. His misery had finally receded, only to be replaced with an immense feeling of mortification. He had been far too revealing last night. He thought he had learned to not run his mouth but had managed to say enough for his members to figure enough out. Hongjoong, for sure, knew that he had a crush on them. Seonghwa had been far too quick to pick up on the whole omega thing. To top it all off, he had even gone so far as to have a panic attack in front of them. There was no coming back from something like that. Yeosang had basically fled the moment the information had been revealed. He hadn't waited around to see their reactions and, quite frankly, he hoped to never find out how they really felt about it. He was still officially on hiatus, so he still had a week in which he could safely avoid them. It wasn't a promotional season so they would not be as busy as he hoped but, at the very least, they would all be out pretty frequently.

Exhausted but just as tired of rotting in bed, Yeosang decided he needed to move around. He hadn't gone to the gym in over a week. Perhaps he would go now. He needed to do something to take his mind off of the shit show that had gone down yesterday and sleep was clearly not an option.

Yeosang shot a quick text to his lawyer, asking for an update on his conversations with the company before getting up and heading to the shower. The other members had an early morning schedule so his dorm should be empty right now. He took his time under the water, the heat relaxing his tense muscles. When Yeosang stepped out of his room, he was surprised by the smell of food. Yunho hadn't left yet?

Turning the corner, he came face to face with a vaguely familiar scene. Yunho was standing at the stove in a pair of bright red shorts and the white and pink Hello Kitty apron Wooyoung had bought as a housewarming gift. Yunho reached for a plate on the counter, the action bringing Yeosang into his peripheral.

"Oh, morning!" he greeted Yeosang with a small smile. Yeosang took in the tight expression on his face, his own stomach lurching in response. He could tell Yunho was holding his tongue and hoped it stayed that way. Maybe they could pretend yesterday hadn't happened.

"Good morning," Yeosang replied, slowly walking to the table to look at the meal spread. The table was already laden with food. There was a seasoned cucumber salad, kimchi, what looked like soybean stew, and two bowls of rice. "How come you're still here? Are you expecting a guest?"

"A guest?" Yunho's brows furrowed before understanding filled his expression. "Oh! Oh, no. I just made you breakfast."

"Me?" Yeosang tilted his head in confusion. Why would Yunho make him breakfast on a random Monday? It wasn't his birthday, was it? Yeosang glanced at his phone screen. No, it wasn't.

"You didn't eat dinner last night," Yunho explained as he plated an eggroll.

Yeosang's face heated just at the reminder of yesterday. Noticing there were no utensils on the table, Yeosang hurriedly busied himself as he glanced curiously at the Alpha.

There have been plenty of nights when Yeosang had gone to bed on an empty stomach and Yunho had never woken up early to prepare breakfast for him. Yunho making him breakfast was odd. There had to be an ulterior motive. After a moment of deliberation, Yeosang decided it was most likely due to the omega reveal. It was something the other Alphas always did. They were taught to be quite particular about the health of the pack omegas, considering the fast paced industry they were in. When they had lived together, the Alphas had taken turns waking early to make breakfast. Ever since they moved out though, Yunho had not needed to do it.

With the table set, Yeosang took his usual seat at the table and waited for Yunho to join him. Yunho brought egg rolls and a vegetable stir fry to the table before taking his regular seat opposite him. The meal passed slowly as they, thankfully, both ate in silence. Yeosang kept sneaking furtive glances at Yunho as they ate, trying to gauge the likelihood of a conversation following the meal. Yunho just ate quietly, smiling whenever their eyes met. Once finished, Yeosang thanked him and hurriedly started to clear the table. Yunho stood and started to collect the dishes as well.

"I can do it, don't worry," Yeosang offered quickly. Yunho wasn't even dressed and Yeosang knew he had at least one group schedule today. He needed to get ready but more importantly, he needed to leave so Yeosang could breathe comfortably again.

"It's okay, I'll help," Yunho said lightly, stacking the dirty dishes. Yeosang felt too awkward to insist further and so he just sped up the process. It had been a while since they had last completed such a mundane task together but it moved smoothly. They cleared up the mess, moving around each other with surprising familiarity until the kitchen was clean.

"Thanks again," Yeosang said politely before quickly running for the front door. Yunho should be long gone by the time he returns.

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It soon became glaringly obvious that the breakfast had not been an odd event but rather his new routine. Not even a full week had passed but Yunho had managed to take over breakfast, making sure that there was a full meal for Yeosang each morning. Even when Yunho had an early schedule, Yeosang still woke to find a covered meal sitting on the table, waiting for him. It wasn't just Yunho either. Despite avoiding the rest of the pack, someone would always find a way to sneak in dinner. One day, Wooyoung had put food in the fridge while he had been visiting his parents. Another time, San had food delivered to his dorm when he got back from the gym. The pack was hovering and Yeosang hated it. Waking to the smell of food had started to make him nauseous. Now, when Yeosang smelled the aromatic smell of a savoury breakfast, his stomach lurched.

With a defeated sigh, Yeosang got out of bed and rubbed his eyes tiredly. He slipped into his closet and blindly reached for his bunny. It was easier and faster to push back the bout of anxiety when he had the comforting texture of its fur to ground him. After a couple of minutes, Yeosang could take a full breath without his stomach tightening. He headed for the kitchen.

"Morning," Yeosang greeted the dancer brightly as he headed for the dish cupboard. He'd gotten up early enough that the table had yet to be set. Good.

Yunho had been looking in the fridge when he entered and was startled at the sound of his voice. "Shit, Yeosang, you scared me," he rubbed the spot on his head that he had banged on the fridge shelf.

Yeosang grimaced. "Sorry."

Yunho spun to face him, hands planted on his hips. "Why did you wake up? You should have slept some more," the dancer chastised.

Yeosang shrugged as he grabbed the rice bowls to set the table. It wasn't like he could just tell him that he felt too anxious to fall back asleep knowing Yunho was out there labouring away on his behalf. Up until his hospital visit, the two of them had always either gone without breakfast or ate something light and easy like toast or cereal. Now though, Yunho kept getting up early just to prepare him a nutritious breakfast. Yeosang worried that Yunho would grow resentful of the increased workload. The Alpha had taunted San for weeks when they had chosen their new dorming arrangement since he had been the only Alpha in his dorm. Yunho had bragged that he could sleep in peacefully now, only for him to suddenly have to start making breakfast again a year later. So Yeosang made sure to get out of bed as soon as he heard or smelled breakfast being made so he could at least help. He would try his best to come out and help set the table and see if Yunho needed anything.

"I smelled the food," Yeosang said simply.

Yunho hummed in response as he sauntered over. "I'll take care of this," he grabbed the bowls and placed them on the counter before turning to Yeosang. "Go wash up," Yunho grabbed him by the shoulders and ushered him out of the kitchen.

Yunho had been getting firmer in his refusal of Yeosang's help as the days passed but this was the first time that he had walked Yeosang out of the kitchen.

"I can help," Yeosang said weakly.

"By sleeping for another thirty minutes," Yunho countered smartly as he headed back to the open fridge. Yeosang hovered for another minute but, when Yunho pretended he wasn't there, reluctantly slinked off to shower. By the time he finished showering and doing his morning skincare routine, breakfast was served.

"Thanks for the food," Yeosang said politely as he picked up his chopsticks. Yunho grunted in response. Despite how normally bubbly he was, Yunho was usually pretty quiet in the morning.

"Did you take cooking lessons without telling me?" he asked after taking a bite, playfully complimenting Yunho's cooking skills.

"Hm," Yunho hummed in response. "We all had to do a three-month course after being classed, remember?"

Yeosang slumped into his chair awkwardly. How could he have forgotten that? It had been mandatory for all the Alphas and Wooyoung had joined them voluntarily.

"Right," he mumbled, his attempt at lightening the mood going down the drain. It wasn't personal, he knew that. Yunho was always like this when he had just woken up. It just felt weird because Yeosang was not used to being around him for this long in the early mornings. Logically, he knew he shouldn't take it personally. Unfortunately, being logical hasn't been one of his recent virtues. He couldn't help but feel that Yunho's behaviour was due to the frustration of waking early to feed him.

When they finished eating, Yunho helped Yeosang clear the table despite all of his protests. Yeosang wished he would just let him do it. It would at least feel like an even split of labour. Instead, as usual, he just rushed the cleaning process so Yunho could start getting ready for the day.

Tomorrow, breakfast was on him.

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Yeosang woke to his alarm an hour earlier than necessary. It was his first day rejoining the group activities and he wanted to start it off right. He groaned, unhappy about being up so early but far more determined to treat Yunho. He had prepared some recipes last night and made sure he had all the necessary ingredients before going to bed last night. Today, he would return the favour. Maybe he could even convince Yunho to take turns making breakfast. He just really didn't want the Alpha to think he was taking him for granted or even that he expected this from him. Also, he would never admit this aloud but, deep down, he was scared of getting used to it only to eventually lose it again. He needed to make sure they were on more equal footing so Yunho didn't grow resentful.

So, squinting sleepily, he navigated the kitchen with dimmed lights to whip up some of the few things he knew how to make. Yeosang very quickly realised he was in over his head. He tried to clean as he went but ended up burning the eggs. He cut three separate fingers on three separate occasions trying to chop vegetables. He forgot to put rice in the rice cooker and ended up having to use the instant rice. He should have taken those damned lessons too. Despite his setbacks, Yeosang had a set table ready before Yunho woke up.

When Yunho emerged ten minutes later, he stared at the table spread in dismay. "What is this?" the Alpha asked, approaching the table carefully.

"I-um, heated up some leftovers and made a little extra," Yeosang gestured to the dishes nervously. "Come, sit."

"You shouldn't have." Yunho frowned as he sat slowly, eyes darting over the dishes on the table.

Yeosang's stomach dropped as the familiar feeling of rejection settled in his gut. He looked at the table with fresh eyes. The rice and side dishes their parents had given them were the only perfect thing on the table. The egg rolls he'd made were overcooked, the pollack soup looked rather grey and his attempt at Dalgona coffee hadn't gone too well with the time constraint.

"Don't do this again," Yunho said curtly, his frown deepening.

"Okay," Yeosang readily agreed as he fought to keep a neutral expression, even as hurt and humiliation threatened to overwhelm him. He had clearly overestimated his cooking prowess. He sat across from the Alpha, eyeing the lacklustre spread before him. Twisting his fingers, he waited for Yunho to take a bite. When Yunho didn't pick up his chopstick after a long moment, Yeosang felt obliged to break the tense silence.

"It's not much but it tastes good," Yeosang said with forced cheerfulness, picking up some of the kimchi Yunho's mom had sent over. It was a safe bet and would hopefully snap Yunho out of his current displeasure. He placed the kimchi on top of Yunho's rice and offered him an encouraging smile.

Yunho's eyebrows shot up and he focused his sleepy stare on him. Yeosang squirmed under the sudden attention.

"You don't have to eat the soup. I found the recipe online so you might not like it." Yeosang looked away, picking up his chopsticks and bringing them to his mouth habitually. He knew his scent had soured but he wasn't sure how to mask that. He just hoped Yunho was too disoriented to notice it.

"Yeosang," he looked back at the sound of his name. Yunho was smiling now, the dark cloud that had been hovering over him since he entered dissipating. Yeosang relaxed slightly. "I'm sorry, I should have said thank you first."

"It's okay, you might not even like it," Yeosang waved him off. He picked up an egg roll and took a small bite. "It's edible."

"I still appreciate the thought," Yunho said softly. Those words had Yeosang's eyes burning and he quickly lowered his gaze to regain control. When had he become so bad at controlling his emotions? "I said what I said earlier because I'd rather you spend your time resting," Yunho continued. "I know you're not used to it but omegas need a good three more hours of sleep than Alphas and betas."

Yunho stood and came around the table, forcing Yeosang to tilt his head back just to see his face. "You've already spent so much time not being able to give your body what it needs." Yunho brushed his hair off of his forehead, holding it out of his eyes. "And it's my fault, Yeosang. I should have continued to cook after we moved in together. Even as a beta, I should have taken better care of you." Yeosang's neck strained as he looked up at the tall dancer standing next to his chair.

"It's okay." The topic was triggering Yeosang and he felt like he would burst into tears any moment. He needed to move on from the conversation immediately. However, Yunho seemed far more determined than he'd seen him in ages. It wouldn't be easy to get out of this. Yeosang had chosen the worst morning to decide to cook for the Alpha. Hopefully the time crunch would encourage Yunho to drop the subject.

"No, it's not," Yunho said as he lowered himself into a crouch, the hand on Yeosang's head moving down his temple to his jaw. "I was wrong for that. I should have done better. I don't want you to just forgive me in order to avoid your feelings, Yeosang. I was wrong and there's nothing I can say to change what I did and I have no idea how to fix it. But I want you to know that I'm trying."

Yeosang felt the dam in his chest start to crack. He closed his eyes tightly and clenched his jaw in an attempt to push everything down. Now was not the time. They had to leave for the hair shop with the rest of the group soon. This was not the time for a heart-to-heart.

"It's okay," he repeated adamantly, pushing Yunho's hand away. "Let's just eat, please. We don't have much time."

Yunho stood but, instead of going back to his seat, he pulled out the chair next to Yeosang.

"Okay, but I'll just feel better knowing you're getting that extra hour so please, leave breakfast to me."

The crack in his chest grew wider and Yeosang found his mouth moving before his brain could catch up. "I don't want to," Yeosang confessed, the words that had been sitting deep in his chest surprising them both by suddenly pouring out. "There's no need to change. I want all of you to stop treating me differently. I'm still me. Kang Yeosang. I'm the same person I've always been. I don't want you guys to do this just because I'm suddenly an omega. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it," Yeosang snapped his mouth shut.

"Yeosang...," Yunho breathed out, blinking at this in shock.. "Yeosang, I didn't mean to-." Yunho abruptly stopped mid-sentence, instead reaching over and pulling him into a hug. Yeosang almost fell out of his chair, catching himself on Yuho's thighs. "I'm so sorry," Yunho apologised insistently. He pulled back and cupped Yeosang's face, wiping away his tears with his thumbs. Yeosang swiped at his face too, trying to get rid of the evidence of his weakness.

"It's not like that, Yeosang. I- yes, it has to do with you being an omega but that's not the only reason. I've always tried to do what's best for you. All of us have. You always say everything's okay so I just... the way we were caring for you before is clearly not enough. I didn't know- I thought I was doing what you needed before by giving you space to be more independent but now," Yunho dropped his hands dejectedly. "I don't think I'm making much sense. It's just that now, I know that you need certain things and they're all things I can easily provide. So why wouldn't I? I'd do more if I just knew what you wanted."

Yunho was looking at him despairingly, an expression Yeosang found out of place on the dancer's face. Yunho was supposed to be happy. Relaxed. There was usually always at least a hint of a smile on the Alpha's face but now, his brows were furrowed, his lips a straight line and his eyes pleading with him for understanding. Yeosang slowly lifted his hand to Yunho's forehead, trying to smooth the creases. Yunho relaxed his countenance, catching Yeosang by the wrist and pressing it to his own.

"I...," Yeosang looked at his wrist as their scents blended slightly. He didn't know what to say to that. Yunho had no reason to lie about something like this. He hadn't even denied that the change in treatment was because of his sub-gender. Was it possible that the changed behaviour was more than just an obligation he needed to fulfil?

"Maybe it's hard to believe me but, Yeosang?" Yunho grabbed Yeosang's chin with his free hand, demanding he look at him. "Can you try? I'll do my best to meet you where you're at so can you meet me halfway? I'm not running around caring for random omegas, am I?" Yunho's thumb caressed Yeosang's scent gland as he spoke. "I'm only doing this because you're Kang Yeosang and I care about you a lot. Just let me take care of you, hmm?"

Yeosang knew his face was extremely flushed. Yeosang's desperate pleas made his heart ache and his sincere gaze wore down on his resolve. Most of Yeosang was yelling at him to trust Yunho's words and he really wanted to. But a part of him he couldn't shake off still felt like he was being scammed. Like Yunho was simply saying what he wanted to hear. Yeosang felt horrible for feeling that way. It felt like he was degrading Yunho's character and turning him into a cunning, unreliable person. He was terrified of allowing hope a seat in his heart.

Chapter End Notes

lol I hope you guys giggled at the birthday comment. A very happy, happy (belated) birthday to Mr. Kang Yeosang. His birthday gift to us was just ♥♥♥

Anyways, I hope you enjoyed the chapter. I'm looking forward to seeing your thoughts on the story progression 🤎

Have a wonderful week! 😘

Jongho

Chapter Notes

[ANNOUNCEMENT AT END]

Ngl, writing from Jongho's P.O.V was a challenge looool. It took me a bit but I think I'm happy with this one. Another shoutout to my beta reader chimchimandsuga because I was lowkey drowning with this one 😂

Anyways, I hope you enjoy it too 🫶

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Where is he?"

Jongho pushed open Yunho's bedroom door carelessly, the door hitting the wall loudly. Yunho startled and removed his headset, swivelling in his seat to face the younger Alpha.

"Jongho, what the-," Yunho took an exaggerated inhale before smiling at him. "Hello." The golden glow of the setting sun filled the bedroom, casting Yunho in a halo that warmed his gaze. Jongho smirked at the suppressed irritation, bypassing the Alpha in favour of the bed calling his name. There was already a lump under Yunho's sheets and the scent of cinnamon permeated the air, mixing with Yunho's fresh scent. Jongho was tempted to join the man under the sheets but, unfortunately, he had just returned from a solo schedule and had yet to shower or change. He settled on sitting on the edge, tapping the lump in greeting.

"Why do you never wait for permission to enter?" Yunho turned in his chair to face him.

"I knocked," Jongho argued, slapping the lump harder when his light tap got no response. The omega groaned and threw the sheets back, sitting up to glare at him. Jongho chuckled at the crumpled look the older man was sporting and rubbed his hip apologetically. His hair was standing on end, defying the laws of gravity, and his cheeks were decorated with sleep lines.

"No manners, whatsoever," Yunho grumbled, putting his headphones back over his ears. "You owe me three kisses now," Yunho smirked, turning back to his screen.

Jongho scoffed. There wasn't a large gap between the desk and bed so simply Jongho reached over, pulling the chair towards him.

"Now?" Yunho asked, surprise filling his face.

Jongho hummed in response. He knew he was complicated. It had even taken him a long time to figure himself out. Initially, he had thought that he disliked physical affection. He used to hate when Wooyoung would try to kiss him, would get annoyed whenever San would

squeeze his cheeks, and get aggravated when Seonghwa would squeeze his thighs. He had always been like that for as long as he could remember. Because of this, Jongho had gravitated towards Yeosang in the beginning. Yeosang was calm, predictable, and didn't take liberties with Jongho's body. As Jongho had grown more comfortable around the elder, he noticed that he had no problem being affectionate with him. When he was with Yeosang, he was free to do as he pleased. Touch came on his terms. He learned that he didn't hate it, per se. It was just that he preferred to remain in control of when, where, and how he was touched.

That epiphany had greatly improved his relationship with the rest of the pack. Once he had told the others, they had quickly fallen into line. Of course, there were times when it didn't matter. Most times though, Jongho operated on an ask-before-you-touch basis. They still took their liberties and tried to extort extra affection out of him at any given point, but they always remained within the confines of his boundaries. Most recently, Yunho had taken to creating ridiculous rules and demanding kisses when Jongho broke them, his most recent being getting permission to enter his room. Payment could be delayed until Jongho was ready and the price was always subject to Yunho's whims.

Jongho held his chair firmly as he planted three consecutive kisses on the dancer. Yunho caught him before he could retreat, squishing his cheeks and stealing a few more before freeing him with a satisfied grin.

"You're spending too much time around Wooyoung," Jongho grumbled, wiping his mouth the moment Yunho freed him. Yunho laughed loudly, turning back to his setup.

"That's a compliment, Yunho-yah," Wooyoung giggled, clamouring to his knees and throwing himself against Jongho's back, nuzzling his neck giddily. He'd immediately taken advantage of the fact that Jongho was currently fine with being touched. "I deserve a kiss too."

"No, you don't," Jongho shrugged him off, pushing him back until he was lying down again.

"Yes, I do. Especially if you want to know where Sangie is," Wooyoung grinned widely, looking extremely pleased with himself. Jongho looked over his shoulder at the older Alpha but Yunho just turned back to his computer screen, pretending not to see him. Jongho rolled his eyes and turned back to Wooyoung.

"Fine," he leaned down and planted the wettest, sloppiest kiss he could manage without grossing himself out. Wooyoung immediately struggled to escape, pushing at his shoulders insistently.

"Okay, okay," he squealed when Jongho didn't let up. "I'll tell you."

Jongho sat back with a satisfied smirk.

"He went out with Soobinnie for dinner," Wooyoung answered, chest heaving as he caught his breath after his little struggle.

"Choi Soobin?" Jongho frowned, immediately annoyed.

Wooyoung nodded, studying him carefully. "They made last-minute plans."

Jongho's frown deepened as his stomach knotted with hurt and rejection. Jongho thought he had been doing a good job at giving Yeosang the space he needed. Ever since the day he'd returned, Jongho had steered clear of the omega, making sure not to hover. Considering the way he had reacted to the others' change in behaviour, Jongho had thought it best to pull back a bit and allow Yeosang some time alone. Maybe that had been the wrong choice since Yunho had managed a breakthrough with his insistence. So Jongho had decided to ask Yeosang to dinner so they could spend a little time together, especially considering Jongho barely saw him all day. He had only had one schedule with the group before he had separated from them for his solo schedules.

Hearing that he had been turned down so that Yeosang could have dinner with a random Alpha was deeply hurtful. The pain quickly morphed into misdirected anger towards Soobin. Deep down, Jongho knew he had no one but himself to blame. He had been the one who had stepped aside stupidly in some twisted belief that Yeosang would appreciate the space. He had failed to take into consideration that all of this mess had occurred because of how much space they had given the man.

"Whoa there, big guy," Wooyoung sat up, reaching for him but hesitant to touch him. Jongho stood quickly, moving out of Wooyoung's reach. He could smell the rancid burning of his coffee scent filling the room and knew Yunho had picked up on it from the careful way he set his headphones down.

"I'm going to go wash up. Let me know when he gets back," Jongho told them, trying to keep his tone casual. They both nodded, Yunho looking between the two of them as he tried to pick up what he had missed.

Jongho ignored it, instead rushing out of the room. He had to get his emotions under control and it was easier to do it alone. Thankfully, the dorm was empty when he entered. Jongho appreciated the silence that welcomed him. Hongjoong was, in all likelihood, still holed up in his studio. Jongho made a beeline towards his bedroom and set about starting his nightly routine. His tendency to pull back at moments like this made him consider his own response to Yeosang's clear distress. Did he project his own wishes on the elder, treating him the way he preferred to be treated in moments of distress? If so, he needed to change tactics immediately.

In the shower, Jongho played an upbeat playlist in the hopes that it would lift his mood as he tried his best to shake off the jealousy he was feeling. He really had no cause for jealousy. Soobin was just Yeosang's long-time friend. There was nothing out of the ordinary in the two of them meeting for a quick meal. Jongho himself often goes out with his friends all the time. Why was it suddenly irritating him so much?

As soon as he pondered the question, the answer came to him. Yeosang was out there, unmarked, with a random Alpha. Jongho hadn't even had the opportunity to scent him this morning. Yeosang was currently in some random restaurant, unmarked, unscented, and with a random Alpha. Jongho gritted his teeth in annoyance, growling low to release some of the tension.

By the time Jongho had finished showering, he had managed to work himself up even more. His soured scent suffused his room, adding to his irritation. Jongho opened his windows and

turned on his air purifier, hoping to combat the oppressive scent. As he dressed, he decided that seeing Yeosang would be counterproductive considering the mood he was in. Yeosang was still very cautious around the pack. He didn't want the omega to see him at such a low point. He yanked his t-shirt over his head and headed back to the bathroom to grab his phone. He would let Yunho and Wooyoung know he was going to sleep and to forget about his request.

A knock sounded out in his bedroom as he picked up his phone and unlocked it.

"What?" Jongho called out, voice more peeved than he intended. When no one responded, Jongho grew more irritated. He grumbled under his breath as he made his way to the door.

"I said wh- Hyung!" Jongho's eyebrows shot up in surprise to find a very nervous-looking omega at his door. He'd taken a startled step backward when Jongho had whipped the door open and was now staring at him like a deer in the headlights.

"Oh, are you busy? I can- I can come back," Yeosang took another step back. He was still fully dressed, clearly having come to him as soon as he arrived. Jongho took a moment to appreciate the soft, pastelly look Yeosang was sporting. Yeosang tended to lean towards darker colours when he dressed himself, so seeing him in the light pink cardigan filled him with a burst of warmth. He was so impossibly cute.

"Oh, no, I thought you were- never mind, come in, hyung," Jongho opened the door wider in invitation. Jongho could see the exact moment his scent reached Yeosang. The omega stiffened, eyes darting to him with cautious curiosity. Jongho plastered on a smile, hoping to trick his body into believing he was happy.

"Are you okay?" Yeosang asked worriedly as he stepped into his room. Any pleasure he may have felt from having Yeosang's concern evaporated as he caught a whiff of caramel mixed in with Yeosang's cherry scent. He growled, covering it with a cough when Yeosang jumped in surprise, his own scent growing sour.

"Sorry, something in my throat," Jongho smiled tightly, coughing again for effect. Yeosang smiled quickly, immediately brightening his entire demeanor but warning bells sounded loudly in Jongho's head. His scent hadn't softened, instead growing more bitter with each passing second. What had caused such an intense reaction? He had startled when Jongho had growled and that alone was not concerning. However, Yeosang's increased anxiety level had Jongho concerned.

"You need water?" Yeosang asked, looking around his room in a bid to avoid eye contact. Jongho watched the omega study the empty walls of his bedroom as though he were in an art exhibit. He hated seeing Yeosang look so uncomfortable and out of his depth in a space that was perfectly safe to him.

"I'm fine," he said after a moment. "You can sit wherever," Jongho gestured to his desk chair and his bed.

"It's okay, I know it's late," Yeosang said, eyes darting between Jongho and the door. "Yunho just said that you asked me to drop by when I got back. I can... go?" Jongho made a quick

mental note to give Yunho a gift for going the extra mile. He had been scared that seeing Yeosang in this mood would only cause problems but just being around Yeosang was calming him down.

"No, no, stay. I was just going to catch up on my drama," Jongho quickly refuted. "I wanted to hang out earlier but you were busy so I told Yunho to let me know when you got back," Jongho explained.

"You want to... hang out now?" Yeosang asked, looking at Jongho through his lashes curiously. Jongho groaned inwardly. Seriously, how was he so damn cute?

"Mm," Jongho nodded happily, those few words washing away all the jealousy that had been suffocating him. He gave Yeosang his first genuine smile of the night and the omega recognized it, his own demeanour lighting up in response. Yeosang quickly turned away.

"You changed a lot in here," he commented, walking around Jongho's bedroom.

Jongho watched him take in his bedroom, looking at it through fresh eyes. It had taken him forever to decide on how to furnish and decorate so now, even though he had all his main furnishings, it still wasn't pulled together. His mess littered the space, giving it a lived-in feel despite the decor. His hamper was overflowing and his desk was littered with random items. Yeosang was looking around slowly, taking in the most minute details carefully. Seeing Yeosang studying his room filled him with guilt. It was insane that one of his pack members was so unfamiliar with his personal space. He silently vowed to do his best to get Yeosang to spend more time here somehow.

"Yeah, it's messy, I know," Jongho headed to his bed and perched in the centre of it. "How was dinner?"

Jongho hated this feeling of uncertainty as he floundered for things to discuss. It never used to permeate the space before but now, he found himself overthinking everything. What had once felt as natural as breathing air now felt like trying to fill his lungs through a straw. He missed the natural chemistry and camaraderie that he had shared with the elder before. He wondered if this was how Yeosang had felt all this time; floundering for solid ground as he tried to pretend he wasn't drowning. Had what had felt so easy to Jongho been hard for Yeosang?

"Fine, we had chicken and beer," Yeosang answered, fingers trailing along his desk. "What did you eat?" The older avoided looking in his direction, instead focusing on random things. He was currently reading the ingredient list of one of his supplement bottles.

"Nothing."

As expected, that caught Yeosang's attention. Jongho hid a satisfied smile when the older man spun to face him.

"What, why?" Yeosang looked worried again. "Are you hungry? Should we order something?" Yeosang pulled out his phone and came to stand by the bed. "I think the jjajangmyeon place is still open."

Jongho hummed in response, settling back against the headboard as he watched Yeosang scroll through his phone. "Don't worry, I'm not hungry," he promised. "Come, sit, let's just watch something," Jongho patted his bed in invitation.

He hoped Yeosang would accept. He wanted the elder close so that Jongho's scent could settle on his skin and mask the sweet caramel that covered him. Yeosang locked his phone and looked at him hesitantly. Jongho could see the gears turning in his head as Yeosang contemplated how to respond.

"I'm dirty," Yeosang finally answered, gesturing to his clothes. Yeosang was still in the outfit he had gone to dinner in and, like him, did not like mixing the outdoors with where they slept. Jongho almost protested, swearing it was fine. Anything Yeosang did was fine. Before he could speak though, a better idea crossed his mind.

"Hmm, then why don't you jump in the shower and I'll find you some clothes to wear?" Jongho pleaded, looking at Yeosang sweetly. He was well aware that the likelihood of Yeosang agreeing to change was low. The older would probably suggest going back to his room to shower and change before returning but Jongho didn't want that. He wanted Yeosang in his clothes. So he added the showering part in the hopes that Yeosang would try to meet him halfway.

Jongho was well aware that the elder would find it difficult to completely deny his request and he wasn't above using Yeosang's soft spot for him to his advantage. The latter had always been extremely tolerant of his antics and playful disrespect. Despite the way Jongho carried himself, he was technically still the youngest member of the pack and, every now and then, he acted the part. Before joining ATEEZ, Jongho was used to being the elder; whether it was with his siblings or friends. Fans and even ATEEZ had noticed that he still carried that energy over to their group dynamics. Him being an Alpha didn't help push down that part of his personality. However, Jongho also knew that his older members had a lot of tenderness and patience that was reserved for him and he used that whenever it best suited him. Yeosang had been no different. Even now, when he was feeling so cautious around him, Yeosang still seemed unable to put that side away.

"How about I just change?" Yeosang compromised, twisting his fingers nervously as though worried Jongho would force him into the shower. Another time, Jongho might have. Now though, he was being extra careful to not push Yeosang too much.

"Okay," Jongho agreed easily, hopping out of bed with a grin. Yeosang smiled weakly in return, recognizing that he had been tricked but too good-natured to go back on his word.

Jongho rushed for his closet before Yeosang could say anything. He offered Yeosang a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, making sure to smile brightly so that Yeosang couldn't misread his enthusiasm. He wanted Yeosang to be fully confident that Jongho wanted him there. Jongho ushered Yeosang to his en suite, closing the door before Yeosang could overthink.

While Yeosang was in his bathroom, Jongho set about preparing his bed. He carefully stacked his pillows so they could recline comfortably as they watched his TV. When Yeosang emerged, Jongho was fully settled. He took in Yeosang's form. The white t-shirt he had given him drowned out his broad shoulders and fell to mid-thigh, nearly covering the blue shorts

Jongho had given him. Jongho's satisfaction at everything going to plan was tinged with sorrow as he noted the way his clothes further accentuated Yeosang's weight loss.

Noticing his stare, Yeosang paused at his bedside, tugging lightly at the hem of the shirt. "It's a bit big," he commented self-consciously.

"It's perfect, you look cute," Jongho replied. Yeosang's face grew expressionless and he cleared his throat. Feeling the air grow a little awkward, Jongho rushed to move past it. "Come, sit," Jongho pulled his sheets back.

Yeosang glanced at the empty spot beside him for a split second before bracing his shoulders. "What are you watching?" Yeosang asked as he climbed in beside him.

"You're going to watch the first episode of Queen of Tears," Jongho told him, earning a startled laugh from the omega. Jongho grinned in response. Everyone around him had grown exasperated with his obsession with the drama but he found a certain joy in that. Besides, it really was a good show.

"Haein-ah," he called out, earning him another laugh.

"Okay, let's see what all the fuss is about then," Yeosang smiled, leaning back against the pillows. Jongho grabbed the remote on his nightstand and turned on the TV mounted on the wall opposite his bed.

"You'll love it, I promise."

As they watched, Jongho took the opportunity to rub his wrist against Yeosang's arm. His clothes had done a decent job at masking Soobin's scent but Jongho wanted to wash it away completely. Yeosang didn't seem to mind when Yunho had done it. Jongho was hoping for the same grace to be shown towards him. Yeosang glanced at their enjoined arms for a long moment. Jongho froze, worried any movement would remind Yeosang that this wasn't something they normally did. When Yeosang just turned back to the TV without a word, Jongho smiled victoriously.

It had been a while since he scented Yeosang, longer than he could remember to be quite frank. He missed the closeness that came with the mixture of their scents. The vaguely familiar sensory explosion of their intermingling scents had him desperate for more. Jongho had long learned to reign that desire back. He had become an expert at denying himself over the years. He had learned to not cross the invisible line in the sand that they had drawn but that annoying, sweet caramel scent was stubborn. It taunted Jongho as, no matter how long he scented Yeosang, it refused to go away. And so his next move caught them both by surprise.

"Jongho?" Yeosang said quietly.

"Hmm?" Jongho pulled his gaze from the TV to meet his gaze. Yeosang tugged at his hold gently, bringing his attention to their hands. At some point, Jongho had mindlessly brought Yeosang's hand to his neck and was rubbing it against his scent gland.

"Oh!" Jongho dropped Yeosang's hand like he had been burned by fire. "Sorry, I didn't notice," Jongho quickly apologised. Due to its sensitivity, the neck gland was considered to be quite intimate. Making someone there was considered just as invasive as touching theirs without permission. Jongho felt horrible.

"It's okay, it was an accident," Yeosang consoled him, rubbing where his hand had touched Jongho. Jongho's stomach churned uncomfortably. He wanted to cover the older in his pheromones, to completely wash out the sweet caramel that sat so comfortably on his skin. He wanted Yeosang to remember where he belonged.

"Hyung," Jongho said, his voice hoarse. Yeosang looked up, eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Yeah?" Yeosang asked. Jongho's gaze dropped to the spot where his neck met his collarbone.

"Can I?" he asked.

Chapter End Notes

Alright my petty darlings, you can go ahead and get mad about Yeosang being easy now loool. Looking forward to hearing your thoughts 😘😘

ANNOUNCEMENT: I'll be taking a one week break 🫣 I have a really busy week ahead of me and I'll have no free time to write so there will be no new upload come next Monday 😭😭 I'm sorry to everyone who is eagerly waiting. I hope this chapter will hold you over for the time being.

Yeosang

Chapter Notes

Hello lovelies, I’m back 😊

Lol here’s a chapter that I absolutely struggled to write on a time crunch 😘

I hope you enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Can I?"

Those two words out of Jongho's mouth had Yeosang's brain short-circuiting completely. He knew what Jongho was asking and yet, he couldn't process the question. His immediate instinct was to tilt his head back and bare his neck but alarm sirens went off in his head, freezing him in his tracks. Jongho's eyes were still fixed on his throat, gaze flitting to his face every few seconds as he waited for Yeosang's answer.

Since he had entered this room, Yeosang had felt split in two. On one hand, he was extremely nervous. Jongho was already upset, his entire room reeking when he'd arrived. He had been worried that Jongho would be upset that he turned him away due to his previous plans. On the other hand, the need to appease the younger was just as strong and got him through the door. Surprisingly, Jongho slipped past his defenses almost immediately. Not only had he convinced him to change, but he had even gotten Yeosang to comfortably lounge on his bed with him. Jongho had come in with such confident familiarity that Yeosang had started to feel relaxed as well.

So, while Jongho scenting his wrist was odd, it had felt so natural he hadn't really thought to question it until he'd found his hand on Jongho's neck. Wrist scenting was a natural part of life for him. Yeosang scented his family often and even some friends. He used to scent the pack when they had been younger as well, as they grew their relationship as trainees and got to know one another better. He had stopped, however, when the growling had begun. He hadn't wanted to instigate anything further by mixing his scent with the pack. For a bit, Wooyoung and Hongjoong had continued to scent him but, after a while, they too had stopped. The neck, however, was completely off-limits. Scenting someone's neck was considered more intimate than kissing in most circles. Whereas people may casually kiss one another, no one ever casually scented someone in this manner.

"Huh?" Yeosang let out a small laugh, hoping to bring down the intensity a bit as he pressed his hand to his neck.

Jongho leaned back slightly, putting a little more space between them.

"Can I scent you?" Jongho asked explicitly, nodding to his neck and leaving no room for misinterpretation. Yeosang's heart pounded loudly in his chest.

Yeosang was baffled. Why would Jongho even want to do it? Yeosang thought back to how the night had progressed. In retrospect, Jongho had seemed pretty determined to mix their scents from the start. He'd tried to get him to shower even. Yeosang wondered how he could discreetly smell himself without the younger noticing. The younger man was fully fixated on him, waiting tirelessly for Yeosang's answer. Looking at Jongho, Yeosang could clearly see the hope behind his intense gaze. He didn't want to hurt his feelings by outright refusing him but Yeosang also could not just allow it like he did most things. That would be crossing a line Jongho didn't seem to notice. The other pack members would undoubtedly notice. That kind of scenting would not wash out easily. He knew, despite their insistence on him being free to touch them as he pleased, neck scenting was not going to fly. They were very territorial about each other. Even if, for some deluded reason, Jongho wanted to try, the fallout would be disastrous. He was already concerned about the blend in his scent since Jongho had rubbed his wrist against his neck.

"Oh, um, well," Yeosang stammered, unable to form a coherent sentence. He looked around the room wildly, trying to think of a way to let the younger one down without hurting his feelings. He wasn't sure what had caused Jongho to want this but he knew the younger had put himself out there to make this request. He contemplated just giving in and allowing Jongho to have what he asked for. His heart was pleading for it after all. He wanted it but he knew he shouldn't cross this line. Whatever Jongho's reasoning was, Yeosang didn't think his heart would survive the ramifications.

Not knowing what else to do, Yeosang let out a long yawn. "Oh, wow, look at the time. Well, this was fun," Yeosang jumped out of Jongho's bed as he spoke, stretching dramatically. "I'm really tired. It's been a long day. I'll see you in the morning."

Jongho sat up straighter, studying him as he put on his show. Yeosang was positive the younger saw through his little act but he had committed to the bit. When Jongho didn't respond, Yeosang took it as his escape opportunity.

"Alright, goodnight." Yeosang smiled tightly and rushed to the door.

"Hyung," Jongho called out. Yeosang froze with his hand on the door handle. Jongho didn't continue speaking so he turned to look back at him. Jongho was sitting at the edge of the bed, looking at him with pursed lips. The clear disappointment on the maknae's face had Yeosang's heart beating harshly against his ribcage.

"You know just saying no is an option too, right hyung?" Jongho asked, his voice carrying the sentiment on his face.

"What?" Yeosang asked weakly. Jongho was clearly bothered, but Yeosang wasn't sure exactly why. Was his excuse too forced?

"You can say no. You don't always have to run away," Jongho raised a brow, daring him to refute his words. Jongho's gaze had darkened and he was looking at Yeosang with an

expression he'd never seen on him before. The mixture of hurt, disappointment, and annoyance had Yeosang's throat closing.

"Run away?" Yeosang repeated dumbly.

Jongho sighed loudly and stood up. "Yeah, you always do this. As soon as something gets uncomfortable, you just run off and hide. You did the same thing when you broke our bonds and when you found out you're an omega. You didn't give us a chance to try to fix it or help. You just ran. Maybe it worked before but I refuse to let it continue."

Yeosang stared at him in complete shock, unable to refute anything he had said. He knew he had a tendency to avoid confrontation. Until now, it had always benefited him. He was liked by others and didn't hurt their feelings. Usually, it was to keep the peace but, with his former pack, it had been how he had protected his heart. He didn't want to hurt their feelings just as much as he was scared they would hurt his feelings. He worried that, if given the chance, they would reaffirm everything Yeosang thinks they believe about him.

"It's unfair to all of us if you just continue to bottle things in. I'm not a mind reader, hyung. None of us are. Just say what you mean instead of shrugging and having us play a guessing game," Jongho's tone was calm but his words were harsh. Yeosang's heart beat faster, far too fast. Again, he was left floundering with nothing to say. Jongho's words echoed Yunho's sentiment from the other day, just more direct.

"I-," he didn't know what to say. Everything in his body was telling him to leave but that would just reinforce Jongho's accusation. The air in the room thinned, making it harder to breathe as Yeosang scrambled for a rebuttal. How did he explain his reasoning without exposing his heart? Oh God, he was running out of oxygen. As the impending sense of doom approached, Yeosang realised he had no choice but to run this time. He didn't want to have another public panic attack. The last time had been embarrassing enough.

"Sorry," he squeezed out before yanking open Jongho's door and rushing to the front door. He could hear Jongho following him but he didn't look back, just trying to get to somewhere quiet.

"Yeosang? What's wrong?" Yeosang heard Seonghwa's voice, but his words didn't register. He couldn't focus on anything past the rolling anxiety in his stomach. His throat burned but he swallowed harshly. His vision had begun to blur. He heard Seonghwa stopping Jongho behind him as he tried to figure out what was happening. Grabbing his shoes, Yeosang ran out of the dorm barefoot and raced towards the stairwell, silently praying that it would be empty.

Yeosang collapsed on the concrete floor of the stairwell, clutching his chest as he tried to breathe. Thankfully, he was aware he was having a panic attack; it made it a lot easier to pull himself out. He tried breathing through his nose but immediately felt even more suffocated. So he just focused on taking deeper breaths. Yeosang felt for his pulse under his jaw, finding the pounding point easily. He focused his attention on his heartbeat as he counted his breaths. His heartbeat slowed, his panic receding with it. Yeosang dropped his hand and leaned back against the wall, body trembling with the adrenaline rush his anxiety had caused. With the

worst part of it over, Yeosang shakily put his shoes on and headed up to his dorm room, scared of what tomorrow would bring.

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A loud thud sounded, startling Yeosang out of his sleep. He straightened up, blinking sleepily as he looked around. The flood of sounds that had functioned as white noise grew clear again, the voices of strangers filtering through his ears.

They were currently in the waiting room at a major broadcasting company, waiting until it was time for the final stage so that the winner could be announced. In the corner, their manager was helping a staff member put the spilled contents of a bag back in their rightful place. Yeosang stretched, yawning tiredly. Thankfully, ATEEZ had already finished their special performance and had about an hour left until they needed to do their makeup touch-up. Since Yeosang's night had been filled with a restless night of tossing and turning, he'd tried to squeeze in a cat nap. With all the bustle happening around him, Yeosang had finally been able to get out of his head long enough to doze off while seated. It made him laugh that, at one point, he had believed dissolving the bonds would at the very least give him a peaceful sleep. Instead, he found himself struggling to sleep more often than not due to the problems that had arisen since. Last night, he couldn't get Jongho's words out of his head. He'd played his words over in his head, the harsh truth in them filling him with shame. He knew that, come morning, the whole pack would have heard about last night. Jongho had been pretty annoyed. He'd heard Yunho leave the dorm last night too. There was no way a conversation hadn't happened.

True to Jongho's words, Yeosang had avoided being alone with the pack all day. He'd left the dorm before breakfast to go to the gym and come home just in time for their manager to arrive for the pickup. Yunho had packed him a lunchbox with breakfast, making him feel even worse about his avoidant behaviour. Maybe Jongho was right. He should have communicated with the pack better. Maybe then, things would not be so strained right now. Compared to before he'd broken their bonds, Yeosang felt even more awkward being around them following the breakage of the bond, always on edge since he had no way to gauge their emotions anymore. Even his relationship with Yunho was still filled with palpable tension. It was as though everyone was holding something back, showing him only their bright and happy sides. It felt uncanny.

"Yeosang-ah," Seonghwa called as he approached him.

"Yeah?" Yeosang replied.

"You're tired. Go lie down," Seonghwa told him, holding out his arm in invitation. Yeosang shook his head immediately, gaze flitting to the corner of the room reserved for the omegas midday nap. He couldn't see past the partitions but he knew Wooyoung and Mingi had already gone to lay down.

"I'm okay," Yeosang declined politely.

"Yunho told me you woke up early. You need to get some rest," Seonghwa argued. Yeosang glanced across the room at the mentioned Alpha. Yunho was sitting beside Jongho and

Hongjoong, the three of them having a heated, whispered conversation. Everyone was wearing scent blockers and Yeosang no longer had a bond to consult so he was left wondering what had caused the exchange.

"I'm fine, I'm used to staying up." Yeosang brushed him off. There were so many people in this room and it felt embarrassing to go lie down in a corner, especially since they all still thought he was a beta. "What's wrong with the guys though?" he deflected.

"Nothing," Seonghwa said quickly. Yeosang turned his attention back to the older omega but Seonghwa just smiled. "Don't worry, it's probably about a game or something."

Yeosang frowned, turning back to them. If it had been just Yunho and Jongho, Yeosang might have been inclined to believe it. However, Hongjoong looked quite invested as well, whispering just as heatedly as the other two.

"Forget them. Come, you need a nap. Today's a long day." Seonghwa grabbed his wrist, tugging lightly.

"I can just doze in a corner, don't worry," Yeosang said, his arm outstretched between them as Seonghwa continued to try and get him to stand. Seonghwa pouted and dropped his arm with a huff. Yeosang almost smiled at his antics but it was washed away the moment Seonghwa spoke.

"Hongjoong-ah," the older man turned to their Captain. Yeosang jumped to his feet, catching Seonghwa's wrist to stop him. He didn't think his refusal was such a big deal but Seonghwa calling Hongjoong worried him. He didn't want to upset the older Alpha, especially considering his current expression. When Hongjoong turned to look at them, his entire demeanour was filled with sharp annoyance. Yeosang dropped his gaze quickly.

"What?" Hongjoong asked, sounding exasperated. Yeosang looked at Seonghwa in panic, tugging his arm pleadingly.

"Hyung," he whispered desperately.

"Yeosang is refusing to nap," Seonghwa said anyway, patting his arm in

"No, I didn't! I said- I said I can sleep where I normally do," Yeosang blustered about, neck heating as his anxiety started to climb. The staff were looking at them too now, curious about the unusual exchange.

"That's not proper sleep. Go join the boys, please," Hongjoong's tone had gentled and he spoke sweetly now. Despite this, Yeosang knew there was no room for argument. Most times, Hongjoong was very laid back when it came to his leadership style. He was fine allowing them to run amuck and do as they please. There were times, like now, when his gaze would change and they all knew better than to push back then.

Yeosang deflated in defeat.

Seonghwa switched their grip so that he was holding Yeosang and led him to the nap corner. He kept his eyes glued to the floor, avoiding the gaze of their staff members. He knew they were probably wondering what had just happened and was worried he was about to become the gossip topic during their break now. The nap corner was just a foldable partition wall that separated the corner from the rest of the room. They placed foldable mats to cover the floor and there were a couple of small pillows and throw blankets available for them to use. Wooyoung and Mingi were already fast asleep, heads resting carefully on silk pillowcases to protect their hairstyles. Seonghwa gestured for Yeosang to lie down first. Yeosang begrudgingly kicked off his shoes and lay down beside the sleeping rapper. Seonghwa covered him in a fleece throw before lying beside him and slipping under as well. Seonghwa fell asleep almost instantly, leaving Yeosang alone to stare at the ceiling. He could still clearly hear everything happening in the rest of the room but the partition gave him a semblance of privacy. He turned to his right, facing Mingi but, as he moved, his arm accidentally hit the rapper.

"Sang?" Mingi's deep voice was filled with sleep, peering at him through squinted eyes.

"Shh, sorry. Go back to sleep." Yeosang whispered, patting Mingi's arm gently in an attempt to coax him down. Mingi grumbled then curled around Wooyoung, tucking him to his chest. Yeosang's heart swelled at the soft picture they made, the softness tainted with jealousy. He hated how he couldn't witness them in moments like this without feeling so painfully alone. His mood soured as he grew upset with himself. He loved them as they were and was always happy to see them love and care for one another. Why did he have to be such a jealous person though? Witnessing this should not have his stomach churning with envy.

Yeosang lay there, wide awake and unable to fall asleep. He was tired but his brain wouldn't quiet down. His mind jumped from one concern to the next. He still had to decide if he would rejoin the pack. Lately, he had found himself making a pros and cons list. His older sister had once told him that, if he ever found himself doing that, he should just leave. His heart rejected that idea, clinging to the hope that he would eventually move on and being around them would become easy again. He hated to imagine a life without the pack and, now without the pained bonds pushing him into a corner, Yeosang thought maybe he could hold on just a little longer. Then there was what Jongho had said about not giving them a chance; had called it unfair. Was Yeosang being unfair to the pack by withholding his own feelings?

The sounds beyond the partition increased and then lulled to a hush, catching Yeosang's attention. The voices seemed to be intentionally lowered, making him wonder if the staff were already talking about him. Did they find it odd that the beta of the group was napping with the omegas? No one outside of ATEEZ knew of the change and Yeosang wasn't sure he ever wanted them to know. There were some things scent blockers could cover but he didn't think it would mask his subgender when it changed. If it changes. At this point, Yeosang was considering a life of celibacy so as not to present fully as an omega. That way, no one would ever know. He sighed softly and sat up slowly, sleep refusing to take over him as the muffled silence allowed his brain to run nonstop without distraction.

Light footsteps approached the corner. Yeosang recognized the footsteps immediately and frowned, wondering why San was coming over. He had been gone since their performance as he had an individual interview scheduled. Yeosang lay down quickly and covered his eyes

with his arm, peeking out to see what the Alpha had come for. Maybe he came to cuddle with Wooyoung. He did that sometimes, especially after a stressful day.

Instead, San crouched at his feet and tapped his calf lightly. Yeosang slowly removed his arm, peering up at the larger man. San gestured for him to approach with a finger. Unable to sleep anyway, Yeosang quietly slipped out of the blanket, making sure to tuck the blanket under Seonghwa before shuffling over.

"Yes?" He whispered, half curious, half concerned. San stood and held his hand out. Yeosang took it, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet. San readjusted his hold so that their fingers interlocked, leading him toward the wall. Yeosang followed easily, curious. For some reason, San's hold didn't feel off to him. Maybe it was because he had grown used to San's physical love language. Still, Yeosang peeked over his shoulder, wondering if they were filming a behind-the-scenes clip. There was no camera in sight. San let him go and sat down, leaning against the wall close to Mingi's feet. Yeosang moved to sit on his other side, body stuttering when San caught his wrist and patted his lap.

"Huh?" Yeosang looked around in confusion, wondering exactly what he had missed. Did San want him to sit on his lap? He looked around again for a camera, baffled by San's behaviour.

"Lie down," San whispered.

"On your lap?" Yeosang whispered back incredulously. San rolled his eyes and tugged his arm, pulling Yeosang down onto his lap. Yeosang lay there uncomfortably, head resting on the arm draped over both of San's thighs. He could feel the warmth from San's thighs seeping into his body, the heat causing his face to flush. Why did San want him to lie down on his lap? San sighed and rearranged his body until he lay with just his head resting on San's lap.

"There, that's better," San murmured, poking Yeosang's forehead lightly.

"What are we doing?" Yeosang asked, trying to figure out what was happening.

"You're not sleeping by yourself." San traced the furrow of his brow, reminding Yeosang to relax his features. Yeosang's face scrunched further as the light touch was ticklish. He wanted to argue that he didn't need help sleeping but he also didn't want to lose this moment with San. He felt like a silent prayer had been answered as San played with his hair mindlessly. He tried not to move, not wanting San to stop the soothing motion. San rested his head on the wall with a soft sigh, looking at the ceiling blankly. Yeosang frowned. San being quiet alone wasn't odd. San being quiet while staring off into nothing definitely was. Something was clearly on his mind. He wondered what the Alpha was thinking about so carefully. Did it have to do with why he was sitting here in the first place?

"Sang-ah," San said after a moment of silence, hand still carding through Yeosang's hair gently. Yeosang hummed in response, looking at him patiently as he waited for San to continue. San looked down at him thoughtfully, smiling after a moment.

"Never mind," San shook his head. "Close your eyes."

Yeosang's eyes fluttered shut obediently but opened seconds later. Something was off. The Alpha was no longer looking at him so he continued to watch him, trying to figure out what it was that San was holding back. He had seemed like he was going to ask him a question but had decided against it. His behaviour, paired with the heated exchange he had seen the other Alphas having, worried him. Something was going on but no one was willing to tell him. He wasn't able to study him for long because San quickly caught him.

"Yeosang," San scolded lightly. "I said close your eyes, you only have thirty minutes left to nap," San flicked his forehead lightly. Yeosang still flinched, covering the hit area with his hand.

"Sorry," he pouted subtly as he rubbed the imaginary sting. He had just been trying to figure out what San had been mulling over so seriously.

San let out a soft laugh, Yeosang looking at him curiously. "What?"

"Nothing," San pulled his hand away from his forehead. "You're just too cute," he said, leaning down to press a kiss to the spot he had hit. Yeosang blinked up at him, trying to hold back his reaction. San had just kissed him. Off camera. He forcefully tamped down the giddy feeling in his stomach, trying not to get excited. San likes cute things. He would kiss a lizard if he found it cute. Yeosang was not special.

"Close your eyes," San coaxed him sweetly, squeezing his cheek as though he were a child.

Too embarrassed by his own thoughts to face the Alpha, Yeosang squeezed his eyes shut.

Chapter End Notes

Well… that's that 😅

I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts 🫶🏽

I'm sorry I didn't respond most of the comments from the previous chapter. I was a bit preoccupied these past couple of weeks. I read them though and I really appreciate all the support you guys have been showing me ♥♥

Seonghwa

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday!

This weekend was my sister's birthday party and all week I've been running around like a headless chicken but I managed to write this anyways so I'm very proud of myself 😅

She's not perfect but she's here so without further ado, here's chapter 10.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Seonghwa stared at the bright ceiling tiles, silently listening to the murmur of voices beyond the partition wall. His nap had been short-lived, too restless to sleep for long. Sleep had always come easy to him but, in recent weeks, Seonghwa found it difficult to remain asleep. He wasnèt sure if it was his subconscious mind running a thousand miles a minute or if it was the uneasiness of his missing bond with Yeosang but, either way, he had yet to find a solution. He had begun sleeping with his boyfriends more frequently since being next to them helped him relax but it was only a temporary solution. He needed to deal with the root cause.

He rolled to his side, that hand reaching for Yeosang coming up empty. Seonghwa frowned and sat up, wondering where the younger had disappeared to. Yeosang needed the sleep more than him. Last night had been rough on him and he’s even left the dorm in the early morning without even eating. Seonghwa knew the younger was bothered. Motion in the peripheral caught his attention. He turned only to make eye contact with San. The Alpha was seated with his back against the wall, his lap filled with a head of hair.

He quietly made his way to the two, not wanting to disturb any of the sleeping omegas. San smiled and patted the open space beside him in invitation. Seonghwa took the seat graciously, resting his head on San’s shoulder as he stared down at Yeosang. It had been a while since he had seen Yeosang look so relaxed. All the tension that the younger one carried had vanished. His jaw hung open, parting his lips slightly. Though Yeosang recently didn’t show many expressions, the emptiness of his face looked peaceful rather than calculated.

“He’s so precious,” Seonghwa whispered. San hummed in response, resting his head against his affectionately.

“Do you think he’s still upset?” he asked the Alpha. San shrugged lightly, the motion jostling Seonghwa slightly. He sighed, patting the fluffy mess of hair on San’s lap.

“The stylists are going to hate you,” he commented teasingly, taking the opportunity to scratch Yeosang’s scalp lightly. His hair was already disheveled. San had clearly been toying with the locks.

“I'll live.” Seonghwa could hear the smile in San’s voice and feel the satisfaction thrumming through the younger’s bond. He smiled in response, happy that the Alpha was feeling calmer. San had worried him last night, closing off his bonds and remaining eerily reserved while everyone else yelled at one another. Reminded of the chaos, Seonghwa quickly checked on the other bonds only to find the other Alphas completely blocked off. He sighed, gnawing on his lip as he recalled last night’s events.

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"What happened?" Seonghwa caught Jongho by the wrist as he tried to follow Yeosang out of the dorm. Jongho stopped, looking between him and the door as he was torn between the two.

"Give me a second, let me just-," Jongho pulled out his grip but Seonghwa quickly caught him by his shirt before he could get too far. Taking into consideration that Yeosang had just ran out reeking of anxiety, Seonghwa wasn’t ready to let the possible cause chase after him. It was even more concerning that Jongho’s barriers were up. Seonghwa had no way to gauge whether the young Alpha was in the right state to calm anyone else down.

"No, let him go," Seonghwa ordered. "You're too wound up."

Jongho looked at the door longingly but stopped tugging on his grip, silently agreeing with his observations. Seonghwa frowned, wondering what had caused the younger to react this way. Jongho was usually the most calculating out of the group. He was methodical in the way he went about everything so for him to be reacting so emotionally to the situation meant that something had happened.

"You go after him then, hyung," Jongho tried pushing him toward the door. “I think he’s about to have a panic attack.”

Seonghwa braced himself, not allowing the younger to body him towards the door. “I don’t think I should. He seemed to really want to be alone,” Seonghwa protested. Jongho stopped pushing him, hands dropping limply to his side.

“Jongho-ya,” Seonghwa said carefully, watching the younger wilt under his eye.

“I think I fucked up,” Jongho sighed, rubbing his face roughly. “I didn’t mean to-,” he trailed off, eyes closed tightly and he looked to the ceiling.

“Hey,” Seonghwa caught his face in both hands, forcing him to look at him. “It’s fine, everything is going to be fine. Just tell me what happened.”

Seonghwa put on an air of confidence he didn’t feel. The younger was completely distressed, worrying Seonghwa as to exactly what went wrong.

"I-," Jongho paused, looking down at the ground shamefully, his hands toying with the fabric of Seonghwa’s shirt.

"You what?" Seonghwa pressed.

"I asked to scent him," Jongho mumbled.

Seonghwa tilted his head in confusion. Was that the reason Yeosang had run out like the hounds of hell were on his heels? Impossible. He was missing something. Jongho sighed heavily, pulling Seonghwa's hands away from his face.

"I asked to scent him and he said no," he clarified, going over to the couch and sitting down heavily.

Yeosang's scent profile as he left had been overwhelmingly strong. He had been emitting a very strong flow of pheromones, the tangy aroma of cherries still lingering in the air. Now though, Seonghwa noticed the light scent of coffee. He had initially assumed that he had simply been smelling Jongho since he was in the room with him but the scent profile was completely different from the one Jongho was currently emitting.

Seonghwa turned to him in horror. There was no way.

Jongho looked at him in confusion before his eyes widened and he jumped to his feet. "No, I didn't force him, I swear. I would never. You know that!"

Relief hit Seonghwa so hard, it almost hurt. He swallowed heavily. "You scared me!" he slapped Jongho's shoulder harshly. Jongho flinched and rubbed the spot.

"I'm sorry. That was an accident. I wasn't focusing and did that thing I do," Jongho sighed, flopping back down on the couch. Seonghwa sat next to him, patting his thigh comfortingly.

"Tell me everything, please," he demanded nicely. Jongho sighed again but started talking. By the end, Seonghwa was staring at him, completely dumbfounded. Jongho looked at him warily, though there was a hint of defiance in his gaze.

"What on earth possessed you to say that?" Seonghwa finally spluttered. Yeosang was already so fragile with everything else going on in his life. The accusation from the youngest Alpha must have overwhelmed him. Seonghwa also didn't appreciate the way Jongho's words had pinned the blame for this rift between them on Yeosang's shoulders. Seonghwa was even more to blame. He had neglected the omega to his own vices all because of his secondary gender. He made grand assumptions that had completely failed to take into consideration Yeosang's temperament.

"What? I'm not exactly wrong," Jongho protested, the defiance moving to the forefront. "He's always doing this!"

"Jongho, you're-" Seonghwa growled in frustration. This wasn't a conversation only the two of them should be having. He needed to call an emergency meeting with the rest of the pack. He stood and pulled out his phone, sending a joint message to the other five pack members.

"What are you doing?" Jongho asked, the wariness coming back.

"Calling the others. We need to do damage control," Seonghwa replied. Jongho gaped at him but Seonghwa just paced the living room as he waited for the rest of his partners to arrive. Wooyung appeared first, dressed in only boxers as he towel-dried his hair.

“What’s up?” Wooyoung asked, plopping down next to the Alpha. “Why do you smell so grumpy?”

“I-.”

“It’s a long story. Let’s wait for everyone to get here,” Seonghwa responded, looking at Jongho sternly. Jongho huffed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs.

“Fine.”

Wooyoung looked between the two of them studiously but Seonghwa ignored him. He needed to brainstorm the best way to tell the pack without it turning into a fight. They were normally pretty good at remaining level-headed but they were all unpredictable when it came to Yeosang. He was worried the pack would turn on Jongho and he would feel targeted by their upset and lash out against them as well. He was most concerned about Wooyoung’s reaction since he was extremely protective when it came to Yeosang.

Seonghwa continued to pace the room, waiting for the others to show. His phone pinged in his hand. He read the message on the lock screen.

‘ ***Be there in 10*** *,’ Hongjoong’s message read. Seonghwa sat down again. He had to keep control of the pack for ten more minutes. He needed to make sure Jongho didn’t say anything until Hongjoong arrived. He wasn’t ready to handle the chaos alone.*

Yunho arrived next, taking one glance at the three seated men before joining them silently. Seonghwa smiled weakly, appreciative of the tall Alpha’s intuition. Mingi and San arrived moments later, entering together. Mingi’s face was slightly swollen, indicating that he had already been asleep when Seonghwa had sent the message. The six of them sat in tense silence, waiting patiently for Hongjoong’s arrival.

When the door beeped five minutes later, everyone straightened in their seats, Seonghwa included. He glanced at Jongho briefly, the younger looking unsettled.

"What happened?" Hongjoong asked as he kicked off his shoes, and entered the dorm. His words triggered a reaction from the previously silent group.

"Yeah, what happened?" San echoed, standing up from his seat. “I had to wake Mingi for this.”

"Is it because of Yeo? He smelled really upset when he came home," Yunho spoke up, looking around the room. Jongho flinched beside him at his words. Seonghwa patted Jongho’s thighs comfortingly before making his way to Hongjoong.

“I’m just worried about Yeosang,” Seonghwa told him, before turning to the members. “He’s already been going through a lot and tonight might have pushed him a bit further than we intended.”

“What did you do?” Yunho turned to Jongho with a disapproving frown. Seonghwa bit his lip nervously at Yunho’s immediate reaction. Jongho glanced at him, waiting for him to nod

encouragingly before repeating what he had told him to the rest of the pack.

When Jongho got to the part where he had told Yeosang it was unfair to them, the room erupted with reactions as five people spoke up simultaneously.

“Why the fuck would you talk for us?” San snapped, standing up and putting distance between them.

"You didn't!" Mingi gasped, sleepy eyes doubling in size.

"Are you serious?" Yunho looked at him incredulously.

"Jongho…," Hongjoong sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“You know damn well it was unfair of you to say that to him,” Wooyoung glared at Jongho, voice louder than everyone else's. Maybe that was the reason Jongho chose to respond to him.

"I didn’t lie!” Jongho stood, arms raised defensively. "I simply said he could just say no next time and that it's hard to play this guessing game since he never wants to say things explicitly," Jongho's pitch had gotten higher as he spoke, noticing the appalled expressions on the majority of the faces in the room. His defence got even more aggravated reactions from the pack.

"Jongho, you know he- oh my God," Mingi stood up, hands on his head.

As the tension in the room escalated, San made his way to Seonghwa’s side. Seonghwa glanced at him briefly but the Alpha made no comment, instead wrapping his arms around him from behind and burying his face in Seonghwa’s neck.

"Why would you put that all on him?" Yunho asked any trace of softness wiped off his expression. Seonghwa grimaced, feeling bad for the youngest Alpha. Since Yunho was always smiling, he was twice as scary when he was upset. He wanted to step in for the younger but Hongjoong grabbed his arm, shaking his head. Seonghwa shuffled nervously, waiting to see what Hongjoong planned on doing. San’s hands tightened around his waist and he lifted his head, pressing his cheek against the elder’s face. Seonghwa knew that San had initially approached him to avoid the yelling and upset near Jongho so his heart swelled at the fact that the young Alpha was trying to help Seonghwa relax despite his own unease. Seonghwa covered San’s arms with his own, encouraging him to hold on tighter.

"What? I wasn't wrong! I have no idea what he's thinking and I don't have the damned bond to check!" Jongho snapped back at Yunho.

"Please, like you ever checked," Wooyoung scoffed, glaring angrily at Jongho. Seonghwa’s eyes widened as Jongho's face darkened. Unable to wait for Hongjoong to step in, Seonghwa tried to stop Jongho from saying whatever it was as he spun to face the omega.

“Guys, thi-,” Seonghwa’s words were drowned out by Jongho’s growl.

"Oh, that's fucking rich coming from you," Jongho said harshly. "My bond with Yeosang had been malnourished, yours was fine. If anyone could have checked in on him properly, it was you, not me."

Wooyoung's bond filled with pain, the expression mirrored on his face. Clarity hit Jongho as he realised the impact of his words and his expression softened.

"Woo, I-," he started but Wooyoung cut him off with a raised hand.

"Either way, I wasn't the one who had to open their big ass mouth and tell him he was wrong for keeping his shut, was I?" Wooyoung retaliated before Jongho could apologise, angry tears wetting his cheeks.

"Enough," Hongjoong bellowed, the volume startling everyone. Seonghwa stared at him in shock. Hongjoong never raised his voice, no matter how difficult the pack was. Seonghwa's brows furrowed in concern. This situation had gotten too far out of hand.

"Wooyoung, you're doing exactly what Jongho did to Yeosangie. Jongho might have misspoken but you're absolutely out of line for acting like he was the only one who failed Yeosang when we were bonded," Hongjoong told the upset omega.

"And Jongho," Hongjoong switched targets before Wooyoung could respond. "The way you responded was completely out of line. I know you're not in the best place today but this is when you need to control yourself the most. You hurt two people you love with your words today," Hongjoong looked at the young Alpha pointedly.

Seonghwa could physically see the fight drain out of Jongho at Hongjoong's words.

"Woo-," Jongho turned to Wooyoung slowly. The omega wiped his cheeks roughly, refusing to meet his faze. "Hyung," Jongho called out again. Wooyoung peeked at him this time. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

Wooyoung sniffled and wiped his cheeks again. "Whatever, you weren't wrong," he mumbled, ducking his head.

"Still, I shouldn't have said it in a bid to hurt you," Jongho apologised sincerely.

"I started it," Wooyoung pouted. "I'm sorry too."

Jongho nodded in acceptance and Wooyoung threw himself at the Alpha as he started to cry again.

"I didn't mean it. I just feel so bad for Yeosangie," he sobbed into Jongho's neck, scenting him for comfort.

"He was just trying to get Yeosang to understand that we would be fine no matter how he chooses to express himself," Mingi spoke up, trying to soothe Wooyoung.

"Yes, but he failed to take into consideration that-," San dropped his head to Seonghwa's shoulder, stopping himself mid-sentence. Seonghwa waited with the others as San tried to

find a nicer way of what he wanted to say. When San lifted his head again, he spoke calmly, "it's a lot of pressure to put on Yeosang. I thought we agreed to take it slow to rebuild his trust." San looked around the room.

Seonghwa nodded in agreement. They had. After Yeosang had returned, they had sat down on how to proceed with the changes. All of them knew they needed to work to convince Yeosang to rejoin the pack. There were disagreements among them as to exactly what Yeosang had meant by feeling like he didn't fit in because they were all together. San, Hongjoong, and Wooyoung were convinced that this meant that Yeosang was interested in them romantically. Mingi and Yunho thought it meant that Yeosang was uncomfortable with their relationship and Jongho was somewhere in the middle. Seonghwa, however, was doing his best to not make assumptions. He thought it best to spell things out for Yeosang and to allow him to make an informed decision. The rest of the pack weren't ready to take that step though and so, they had settled on trying to slowly mend their relationship with Yeosang and just show him that they cared for him no matter what.

"Well, I think we can all agree that Jongho went about it terribly," Hongjoong sighed. "Whether he meant it or not, his words had a pretty big impact on Yeosang. And, I want to remind you, Jongho-ya, that we don't have Yeosang's trust. Where you think your relationship with him is; he's not there. He's overthinking everything. That's why we agreed to give him space and take it slow. You went against that agreement."

Jongho deflated at Hongjoong's scolding. He looked down dejectedly.

"All the conversations in the world could happen but until we show Yeosang how we feel, we'll still see no progress. He has to feel safe before anything else," Seonghwa reminded them sternly. If they fail at this, they may as well give up then.

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Although the events of last night with his pack had been resolved, there still remained a palpable tension in the group that they couldn't seem to shake off. He knew it was getting harder for the others to give Yeosang his space. Jongho's impulsivity had been a result of this factor. Prior to this past week, none of them had gone so long as to not spend time with Yeosang on the clock. They were regularly scheduled to be together, whether it was for something as mundane as dance practice or a radio event. This small moment, sitting in a quiet corner with San and Yeosang, was probably the most intimate interaction Seonghwa had been privy to with the younger omega since the bond snapped. It filled Seonghwa with a sense of peace. No matter what happened, they were going to get through it. They were one, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Tried my hand at a flashback and I'm not happy with the transitioning (will prob get back to her for some polishing after I've finished the story) but y'all deserve an update after waiting all week. I hope seeing the pack fight fed some of your thirst for the pack's suffering 😂😂

As always, I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts.❤️❤️❤️

Yeosang

Chapter Notes

> I had a lot of fun writing this chapter. Ngl, writing from Yeosang's P.O.V is so much easier for me 😩

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Isn't that right, Yeosang-ssi?" Mingi asked, leaning over to see him past San's body.

Yeosang smiled and nodded in agreement, silently praying that he had not just walked into a trap. It wouldn't be the first time his members had played this trick, proving that he had zoned out during the conversation. Thankfully, today didn't seem to be the case as Mingi sat back in his seat and nodded in affirmation at the production team before them. Yeosang hoped he hadn't agreed to some ridiculous terms for the second day of filming but he would find out then. Right now, he was counting down the minutes until the director called it quits.

He had no idea why the program wanted to do these interviews now, especially considering they would still be filming with them tomorrow. They were filming for a variety show with just the eight of them. The concept was that of a vacation trip but Yeosang felt anything but relaxed. With constantly rolling cameras on him for the past fourteen hours, Yeosang had not had a moment of reprieve. The idea of falling asleep on camera only to wake up to it as well made his stomach roll. And all these ridiculous interviews were getting under his skin. It was his third interview of the day. Wouldn't it make more sense to do the interviews all at once? The staff had said they wanted to get their thoughts while it was still fresh but Yeosang was reaching his breaking point. He plastered on a soft smile, rolling his shoulders subtly to try and shake off the tension. The others were struggling too. Their day has been just as long as his but they were still functioning. He could pull through this.

The relief when the interviews ended was short-lived. The staff gathered them in the living room and announced that they had one last game to play before they slept.

"Is it about who makes breakfast?" Wooyoung asked, hand raised high above his head. Yeosang did not understand how the omega was able to keep his energy up. The production team had made them play multiple games throughout the day. They'd decided what activities they did, where they went, and what they ate through a thousand mini-games. Knowing them, this last game was where they slept.

"You might have noticed that all the rooms here are not the same," the head writer affirmed his thoughts. When they arrived at the vacation home, they had all taken a tour of the space. There were three bedrooms. One room had a king-sized bed, the second a double bed, the third two single beds with a floor mattress, and the last, two floor mattresses. As the writer explained the game and prizes, Yeosang fervently hoped for a single bed.

“Last place is sleeping on the couch,” she finished, gesturing to the loveseat San and Wooyoung were cuddling on.

The revelation resulted in an onslaught of loud complaints from the pack, Yeosang voicing his agreement to every few of their points. When the dust had settled, the rules still remained. The competition for the game was fierce as everyone turned on one another in a bid for the king bed. Surprisingly, Seonghwa emerged victorious. Hongjoong and Yunho ended up on the double bed, Jongho and Wooyoung on the single bed, and San and Mingi on the floor mattresses. This left Yeosang with the cramped loveseat. Though he had been aiming for the singles, he was relieved that he would still have his own space. At least he wasn’t left to share a bed.

The production team stuck around as they prepared for bed, cameras filming them even in the bathrooms. Yeosang was on the verge of collapse. His omega was incredibly tense and overstimulated and he was desperate for a moment without a camera in his face. As the night came to an end, Yeosang crawled under the blanket strewn on the sofa. He could hear the muffled laughter coming from the rooms down the hall as they prepared for bed and was filled with an odd mixture of happiness, jealousy, and resentment. He loved to hear their joy, he wished he could participate with ease but he also needed them to settle down so the production team and their million cameras would leave. After what felt like an eternity of faking sleep, the staff turned their equipment off and retreated silently, leaving Yeosang alone in a dark room.

Yeosang slowly relaxed, prepared for the physical reaction of his repressed emotions. He was one step ahead though, and well versed in managing himself. He sat up and pressed his back against the seat, pulling his knees to his chest. His heart thumped irregularly in his chest, feeling as though it was skipping beats. Yeosang choked on an inhale, chest tight beyond belief. Instinctively, he reached out mentally, searching for Wooyoung’s bond to help regulate himself. Coming up empty, Yeosang was hit with immense isolation. Maybe it was time to rejoin his parent's pack. It would be mortifying to go crawling back at his age but he had to admit he needed the connection. He had never been alone like this before and he was slowly reaching his breaking point.

“Five,” he murmured, looking around the dark living room. The only light came from the vent hood in the kitchen, diffusing the space with barely visible shadows.

His watch, the sofa, the coffee table, the lamp, and the vase.

Yeosang closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. He was so sick and tired of his constant anxiety attacks. He hated that he was constantly on a hair trigger, one bad moment away from a breakdown. The soreness in his shoulders travelled down to his shoulder blades, causing his back to cramp. Yeosang could hear motion further in the house, the members moving between the rooms quietly. He was familiar with the routine. After a schedule like this, the Alphas would rally, no matter how tired they were, to help the omegas regulate. Yeosang squeezed his eyes, trying to drown out the noises as the desperate longing threatened to overwhelm him.

“Four,” he exhaled.

His satin pyjamas pants, the soft blanket, the rough fabric of the loveseat, his hair.

Yeosang had read about this grounding technique long ago but he didn't get many chances to use it. Normally, his attacks were far more overwhelming and he struggled to think clearly. Today though, he was lucid enough to remember the steps.

“Three,” he inhaled.

His own breaths, the ticking clock, footsteps.

Yeosang raised his head, looking down the hall as a slender figure materialised from the darkness. He swallowed harshly, choking back the emotions his body was trying to dispel. His scent had soured already but he wasn’t bothered by that. As long as they didn’t notice, he would manage.

‘*Two*,’ he thought, resting his cheek on his knee, watching Hongjoong pass him and head to the kitchen. However, ever since Hongjoong had appeared, all the effort Yeosang had put into relaxing himself had flown out the door. His body was tense once more as he anxiously watched the Captain move around the kitchen, nervous he would notice how close to the precipice Yeosang was standing. It took more effort to focus, making the technique feel useless. Still, he tried.

The detergent on his blanket, Hongjoong’s woodsy scent.

Hongjoong made his way back, a glass of warm milk in his hand. However, instead of heading towards the hall, he came to Yeosang’s side.

“Hey, you up?” Hongjoong asked softly, the inquiry a simple courtesy. Yeosang looked up at him from his seat, the answer glaringly obvious. Hongjoong smiled and placed the glass on the coffee table. He settled down on the seat beside him, pinning his blanket beneath him. “How’re you feeling?”

Yeosang looked at the trapped material, wishing he could pull it out and cover himself. He felt too exposed, even in the darkness. He answered carefully, “Fine. What’s up?”

“Nothing, just checking in,” Hongjoong turned to face him, resting an arm on the back of the couch. Yeosang’s eyebrows furrowed momentarily before understanding dawned on him. The Alphas *had* rallied and, now that he was an Omega, one of them had come to find him. Rather than relief, Yeosang was surprised to feel irritation bubbling in his chest. He looked away. Just moments ago, he had been yearning for exactly this but now that Hongjoong sat before him, he wanted to be left alone.

Once again, everything felt so performative. Yeosang had spent many hard days like today alone, pushed to the side because everyone thought him to be self-sufficient. After a while, he’d had no choice but to fill those shoes. He’d spent years developing his coping mechanisms but everything had always been temporary. Eventually, it would stop working and the knot in his chest would just grow tighter. And every single time, he’d longed for anyone to notice. He couldn’t bring himself to ask for help, especially since everyone was telling him that he shouldn’t need it. He had just silently hoped that someone would notice.

Now though, with a label to validate his feelings, his group mates were making the effort but he found that he hated it. Despite Yunho's reassurance, everything they did felt like a performance. If he wasn't careful and relied too heavily on them, he would end up a useless burden.

"I'm good, I know how to handle it," Yeosang said politely. Hongjoong's lowered his head silently. Yeosang heard him take a shaky breath before he raised his head once more, a sad smile on his face. Yeosang frowned, the expression hurting his heart.

"I know you can," Hongjoong said softly, putting his hand over Yeosang's. "But I want to help. Please, let me?"

Hongjoong was looking at him earnestly, eyes glittering in the dark room. Yeosang's heart stuttered in response. His omega was pleading with him as well, begging him to hand over the reins and let someone else carry the burden. Hongjoong was dependable, it cried. Hongjoong would make everything better.

Unable to turn away Hongjoong's sincere pleading or his own desires, Yeosang relented. He shrugged. Hongjoong tongued his teeth, studying Yeosang carefully as though he was trying to decipher what Yeosang's shrug had meant. Jongho's criticism echoes in his thoughts.

'*I'm not a mind reader, hyung. None of us are,*' Jongho had said.

Worried Hongjoong might be feeling conflicted, Yeosang nodded slowly. The gesture brought a smile to Hongjoong's face and he shifted closer until their bodies were touching. Yeosang's omega melted at the touch, itching to burrow closer to the Alpha but he restrained himself. Despite the tension that filled his body, his heart was beating slowly at the moment. He was still fine.

Hongjoong frowned.

"You have to let it go," he murmured, bringing the hand on the couch over Yeosang's shoulder and pulling him closer. As he spoke, Hongjoong flipped over Yeosang's hand, exposing his wrist. "Stop fighting for control. Relax your body."

Yeosang didn't want to relax. He was holding onto control with a thread. He couldn't bear to let it snap right now. For one, it would be absolutely humiliating but also, Hongjoong would not be able to handle it. The older man cradled his hand, thumb brushing over Yeosang's wrist gently. He focused on the sensation, watching the hypnotising motion of Hongjoong's steady movements. With his other hand, Hongjoong pressed softly on his temple, encouraging him to lean against him. Since Yeosang had already slumped as he sat, his cheek came to rest on Hongjoong's shoulder, his forehead against Hongjoong's neck. The position felt oddly intimate but Hongjoong didn't move away. Rather, he adjusted his other hand so their wrists could come into contact.

"I'm going to scent you," Hongjoong murmured, giving Yeosang a moment to refuse. Yeosang didn't pull away, silently staring at their joined hands as Hongjoong stimulated his own gland. The warm scent of sandalwood melded with his fruit scent, filling him with an odd sense of satisfaction. It felt different from when Yunho and Jongho had scented him,

something so purposeful and methodical in Hongjoong's actions. Their scents intertwined, the mixture providing Yeosang's omega with a semblance of home and safety.

There was a reason Hongjoong was the pack Alpha. Everything about him called to the others, promising protection and comfort as long as they remained close. Yeosang had not felt the protection that came with having a pack recently and so his omega clung to the interaction. As they sat together in silence, Hongjoong's pulse beating slow and steady against his cheek, Yeosang slowly began to relax.

Maybe it was because he was too tired to hold himself back or his curiosity won out, but Yeosang found himself voicing his thoughts unprompted. "You guys have been doing that a lot recently," he commented.

"Hmm?" Hongjoong tilted his head, trying to see his face. Yeosang noticed this out of his peripheral but didn't lift his gaze.

Yeosang twisted his wrist lightly, pulling Hongjoong's attention to it.

"Scenting you?" Hongjoong asked. Yeosang nodded, his forehead accidentally grazing Hongjoong's scent gland.

"Sorry," he lifted his head slightly but Hongjoong stopped him, pushing him back down.

When Yeosang settled back down, Hongjoong asked, "Would you like us to stop?"

Yeosang considered his question. It was definitely different but he didn't hate it. When he had been in the pack, they had rarely scented him. Now though, within the course of one week, he had been scented by almost all the Alphas. The behaviour was odd and, while it bothered him that they had started this after he had left, he didn't have the strength to lie. He couldn't help but feel robbed by the behaviour though. If they had been like this before, he would not have spent years in constant pain, praying for their next touch.

"Maybe we're trying to stake a claim," Hongjoong said lightly after a stretched silence.

Yeosang furrowed his brows at the statement. "Why?" he asked.

"Well, speaking for myself personally, it's been…" Hongjoong paused suddenly, looking up at the ceiling. Yeosang looked up too, trying to read his expression. Though all he could see was the sharp angle of Hongjoong's jaw and the graceful line of his neck, he couldn't tear his gaze away. He waited, watching the bobble of Hongjoong's Adam's apple as he formulated his thoughts.

"Having you out of my pack has been really hard. I know you left for a reason and I respect that. It's just, you've been mine for so long," Hongjoong spoke to the ceiling. "Now that you're not, it feels so empty here." Hongjoong released his wrist, rubbing at the centre of his chest. His normally earthy scent had taken on a smokey undertone, carrying his sadness. "I know no one else knows right now outside of our staff and families but, I'm just so scared every day that someone's going to whisk you away and I'll lose any chance of ever getting you back."

Yeosang's own chest echoed the agony in Hongjoong's words. He leaned closer to Hongjoong, wrapping his arm around his waist comfortingly. Hongjoong's words carved a hole in his chest, filling him with doubt. He'd thought for so long that his existence didn't matter much to them. He'd felt like an extra, someone tagging along just because they could not get rid of him nicely. Now though, Hongjoong sat beside him, vulnerably expressing his fears and Yeosang didn't know how to relieve them. He couldn't make empty promises, swearing to stay when he was still so conflicted. But the sorrow emitting from the Captain was undeniable.

"Hyung," Yeosang murmured, not sure what else to say. Hongjoong's head lowered, his chin resting on Yeosang's temple and the arm around him tightening.

"I'm not saying this to make you feel bad or pressure you, Sang-ah," Hongjoong said, just as softly. "I just need you to know how precious you are to me. I'd chase you to the ends of the world if I had to," Hongjoong said devotedly.

Yeosang hugged him tighter, not sure what he could say to Hongjoong's declaration. He had forgotten how close he was to Hongjoong's neck and accidentally rubbed at his scent gland again. Hongjoong's pheromones burst out, the familiar scent so heady in such a large dose. Yeosang inhaled secretly before pulling back slightly but Hongjoong cupped the back of his head, encouraging him to stay still.

"It's okay, you don't have to say anything," the Captain promised. "Just stay with me a little longer, hmm?"

Yeosang was tempted to pull away. The situation had gotten so far out of his control, that he didn't even know where to start to remedy it. What had started as Hongjoong coming to comfort him had turned into something so emotionally taxing, that Yeosang could barely breathe. So many unexpected occurrences had thrown him off course in so little time and he was floundering in deep waters with nothing to hold onto. Hongjoong felt like a glowing buoy, promising to hold him afloat long enough for him to regain his strength. It took a moment to build up the courage, but he relaxed again, melding his forehead into the nook of Hongjoong's neck.

"We're okay. I'll make sure of it," Hongjoong promised, resting his cheek against Yeosang's temple. Hongjoong's scent grew stronger as he purposely released calming pheromones, the fingers in his hair encouraging him to relax. The gentle touch and the warm scent of sandalwood helped wash away the budding anxiety that had been sitting in his stomach. Hongjoong's scent called to him, beckoning him closer until Yeosang could no longer resist it. He tilted his head slightly in an attempt to better smell him. Overestimating the space, his nose gently caressed Hongjoong's gland. Yeosang froze, waiting for a stern scolding for crossing the line but Hongjoong just leaned closer, pressing closer to Yeosang's face.

"Go ahead," Hongjoong cupped the back of his head, holding him steady.

Yeosang's heart stuttered. Was Hongjoong really inviting him to scent his neck? Yeosang had never done it before with the pack Alpha. His only experience with that type of scenting had been with Wooyoung, prior to their presentations. He had just recently rejected Jongho out of fear because this type of scenting was considered pretty intimate. If Hongjoong was allowing

it though, no one would be upset. Though he may not act like it, Hongjoong had the last word when it really came down to it.

Hongjoong's nails lightly scratched at his scalp encouragingly as he tilted his head back slightly in an open invitation. Unable to gather the courage to nuzzle him, Yeosang settled for breathing deeply.

The warm, woody scent filled his senses, instantly soothing his frayed nerves. Hongjoong had always stood strong and unwavering, radiating a sense of stability and so, despite the Alpha's smaller stature, Yeosang found himself fully resting against the pack Alpha. Hongjoong bore his weight silently, rotating between massaging his neck and scratching his scalp. Yeosang knew he shouldn't allow this to continue. He shouldn't take advantage of Hongjoong's guilt. He had been so adamant that he wouldn't settle for their pitying obligation and yet, now that he was face to face with it, he couldn't find the strength to step away. He scoffed, a soft burst of air puffing against Hongjoong's neck. Hongjoong's scent grew headier, slowly burning away his shame.

Yeosang could hear the soft murmurs from the Alpha but he couldn’t focus on the words, completely surrounded by this warm cocoon Hongjoong had created around him. Hongjoong's tender touches snuck past his self-control and he found himself feeling fuzzily warm. Without really thinking about it, Yeosang gently nuzzled Hongjoong's gland. He was hit with a burst of pheromones so warm and sweet that he couldn't think about anything but getting more. He rubbed his cheek against his gland, wanting to absorb the scent into his own scent profile. As Hongjoong’s pheromones flooded his senses, he no longer cared about anything outside of Hongjoong's soft skin and woodsy scent. All of the tension of the day melted away and Yeosang's larger body slumped against the small Captain as his limbs turned into jello, unable to withstand his own weight. His eyelids grew heavy as he grew drowsy, his omega finding complete security for the first time in forever.

“Goodnight,” Hongjoong murmured against his temple. Yeosang hummed in response, too relaxed to move his jaw as sleep overtook him.

Chapter End Notes

So… 👀

Penny for your thoughts?

As always, I look forward to your reactions. ❤️❤️❤️

Wooyoung

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday!! I'll see you in the comments :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The clock ticked silently, the numbers staring at him tauntingly. It was already 2 a.m. and Yeosang had still not returned. Wooyoung was beginning to grow concerned. Yeosang had said he would be back last night but it was already past midnight. Wooyoung had been eager to wait for him since he had been gone for four days already. After the previous week of gruelling schedules, the company had granted them a week's vacation before they threw themselves into comeback preparations. He had been looking forward to spending time with his favourite person but the latter had surprised them all by announcing that he would be spending the break at his parents home. Wooyoung had been gutted. This was their only free time for the foreseeable future and Yeosang had wanted to spend it as far away from them as possible.

He'd stupidly believed that things were improving. Ever since the night that Yeosang had scented Hongjoong, he'd been more laid back, a glimmer of the old Yeosang starting to shine through. But he had run again at the first opportunity granted. To make matters worse, Mingi had run into Yeosang and his lawyers leaving the CEO's office a couple of days ago, reminding Wooyoung of a fact that he had been trying to forget lately.

Yeosang still wasn't willing to rejoin the pack and he was adamant on leaving the group. Frustrated, Wooyoung sighed, and kicked the throw blanket off of him. He was startled when San snapped beside him.

"Jung Wooyoung, I swear to God-," San threatened, cutting himself off with a short growl. Wooyoung pressed his lips together tightly, stifling a laugh as he grabbed the blanket off the floor.

"Sorry, sorry," he appeased, taking care to tuck San in delicately. He has been so lost in thought, he had forgotten that San was sharing the blanket with him. He knew San was already on edge, grumpy for being awake for so long. When Yeosang had announced in the group chat that he would be returning early, Wooyoung had decided he would wait for him in his dorm. However, Yeosang had not given a specific time and so Wooyoung had just hung around the entire day. Initially, Jongho, Yunho, and Mingi had waited with them but they had tapped out at midnight, Jongho declaring the day officially over. Only he and San had remained and yet, two hours later, Yeosang was still nowhere to be seen.

Wooyoung sighed again, grabbed his iced coffee off the table and took a long drag of the watered down drink. Yeosang would definitely be home before the sun rose. They sat in

silence for another couple of minutes before San grabbed the remote and turned off the television.

“It’s late, Young-ah. He’s not coming back tonight,” he said, untangling himself from the cocoon Wooyoung had stuffed him into. “I’m going to bed. You coming?”

Wooyoung was almost tempted to give up; San’s offer was extremely appealing. Stubbornly, he shook his head. “He is. He said so,” Wooyoung said firmly.

“Okay,” San smiled tightly and ruffled his hair. “No more coffee though.” The stern expression on the Alpha’s face pulled Wooyoung out of his melancholy briefly and he grabbed San’s face. He loved how thoughtful and caring San was, even if some of their boyfriends’ affectionately called him domineering. He showed his appreciation with a series of kisses, San tiredly allowing him to kiss him to his heart's content before freeing him.

“Goodnight,” Wooyoung, giving him one final kiss. San sleepily returned his farewell, standing with a laboured groan. Wooyoung hid a smile again. Sometimes, San really did act like an old man.

Wooyoung followed him to the door, disappointed that his partner in crime was leaving him behind. San paused on his way out, turning to look at him carefully. Wooyoung pouted exaggeratedly, hoping it’ll encourage the Alpha to change his mind but San just chuckled, poking his forehead lightly.

“Don’t stay up too long,” San reminded him.

“I know, I’ll just wait one more hour,” Wooyoung promised.

The Alpha pursed his lips, frowning as he considered something. “Actually, wake Yunho up in an hour if he’s still not home. Send a message in the group chat also. I’ll leave my notifications on.”

Wooyoung agreed easily. If Yeosang didn’t come home soon, it was definitely cause for concern. San bid him goodnight one more time before exiting, leaving him alone in an empty foyer. He sighed, pulling out his phone. Seonghwa had been the last to message in the group chat, acknowledging Yeosang’s text. He reread Yeosang’s texts again.

Hey **(4:36 p.m.)**

I’ll be coming back to the dorm tonight **(4:37 p.m.)**

might be late **(9:49 p.m.)**

going for dinner with my noona ^_^ **(9:49 p.m.)**

Wooyoung had simply liked the messages and had refrained from texting Yeosang since he knew he was going to be out with his sister. It had taken a lot of effort but he didn’t want to come off as overbearing, especially since Yeosang was finally returning. He would have three days with him before their work began once more. The automated light shut off as he stared at his phone, leaving him in the dark. He bit his lip, finger hovering over Yeosang’s name. It

was 2 in the morning! Wooyoung was just being a good friend. It was far too late for Yeosang to be outside gallivanting doing God knows what!

Before he could fall too deep into his imagination of Yeosang's night out in the town, the front door beeped. Wooyoung lit up, rushing to open the door.

"Yeosang-ah," Wooyoung cried out as he threw the door open, throwing himself at the omega. Yeosang jumped back, moving just out of his reach as he looked up at him startled. "What took you so long?" he whined, throwing himself at Yeosang once more. This time, he stood still, allowing Wooyoung to drape himself against him dramatically. He pulled back quickly, grabbing Yeosang's face in his hands.

"Do I have to start paying to see your face?" he asked grumpily. Wooyoung took in his image: the fluffy hair, the bright eyes, the red birthmark, his plush lips. He wished he could kiss Yeosang as easily as he had kissed San moments ago, the man before him too precious to just look at. Yeosang chuckled lightly and pushed his hands away.

"Maybe," he joked. "Why are you up so late?" Yeosang asked, stepping over the threshold and holding the door open for Wooyoung to come back in.

"What do you mean why am I up so late? I was waiting for you!" Wooyoung huffed, stomping in and stepping up into the rest of the house.

"Oh," Yeosang nodded as though it was perfectly natural to come home and be ambushed in the doorway. It was one of the things Wooyoung loved about Yeosang. He was so accepting of Wooyoung's behaviour, no matter how random it may be.

"You're late," Wooyoung pointed out, crossing his arms.

"I said I would be," Yeosang replied, taking his shoes off and placing them neatly on the shelf. Wooyoung narrowed his eyes as his dismissive response. Yeosang tilted his head curiously. Wooyoung narrowed his eyes even more, looking at Yeosang through two slits. Yeosang cleared his throat, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "Are you going to move?"

"I guess," Wooyoung mused, snatching Yeosang's bag out of his hand and turned to march towards his bedroom. "Now that you're here, we can sleep." Wooyoung announced, mentally crossing his fingers. He hoped that if he moved with enough confidence, Yeosang wouldn't find his request odd and allow him to spend the night. It had been ages since they'd slept together, just the two of them. Yes, they'd roomed together for years and shared hotel rooms. They had even cuddled to sleep together on camera as they lay like packed sardines with the rest of the pack. But it had been longer than he could remember since it had just been the two of them and he really needed just one night.

"In my room?" Yeosang asked, voice trailing after him. Wooyoung nodded, turning to walk backwards. "Together?" he clarified, looking absolutely bewildered.

Wooyoung's confidence faltered. Would Yeosang be too uncomfortable? He knew that Yeosang liked his space. Whereas Wooyoung always wanted to be doing something with the

people close to him, Yeosang enjoyed his solitude. Was Wooyoung pushing too hard? He had thought that Yeosang's aversion to his and the other omega's touch had been a misunderstanding. What he had initially believed to be stemming from Yeosang's natural reservedness had turned out to be concern about the Alphas reactions. Yeosang's omega had grown anxious around them and had taught him to keep his distance. Wooyoung wasn't too sure how he had gotten to that conclusion since the Alphas in the group weren't those traditional Alpha's who believed a mated omega was their property. Still, now that those misunderstandings had been cleared, shouldn't Yeosang be fine having a sleepover with him?

Still, he nodded brightly.

"Yeah, it'll be like old times," he said with forced cheerfulness. Like always, he would fake it until he made it. He did this in all aspects of his life. It was how he had befriended ATEEZ, how he had mustered up the courage to ask Hongjoong for help during his heats, how he had convinced the world that nothing embarrassed him. It would hopefully be how he mended his broken relationship with Yeosang. And so he pressed forwards, switching to begging when Yeosang looked like he would turn him away

"Please, Sang-ah? Please, please, please?" Wooyoung pleaded, eyes widening to make himself cuter. Yeosang had never fallen for it before but, every now and then, he would relent simply for optics. Today was thankfully one of those days.

"Okay, but I need to shower first," his best friend told him. Wooyoung squealed, quickly suppressing it when Yeosang's eyes widened, looking towards Yunho's bedroom.

"Sorry," he whispered, trying to hide a grin. It resulted in an obnoxious smirk that Yeosang gracefully ignored. "That's fine, I'll just wait in bed," Wooyoung responded to his earlier comment, twirling then skipping the rest of the way towards Yeosang's bedroom.

"Did you drink coffee?" Yeosang asked, trailing after him. Wooyoung chuckled inwardly. Leave it to Yeosang to immediately figure out why he was so high energy. After all these years, no one knew him like Yeosang did. It filled him with a burst of warmth. His mother had always said that to be loved was to be known and no one embodied that quite like Kang Yeosang. He had thought he knew Yeosang too but this past month's events had proven otherwise. It hurt to know that something he had thought to be unbreakable had shattered so thoroughly without him even noticing. He quickly pushed those thoughts outside. Yeosang was still here. It wasn't unrepairable.

"What gave it away?" Wooyoung replied, pushing the door open. His stomach tightened at the sight of his room, remembering the last time he had been in here. He could feel the ghost of their missing bond tickling at his senses, the agonising pain rearing its head once more. He quickly put up his barriers, not wanting to disrupt the others in their sleep. He inhaled deeply to ground himself, his nose filling with the scent of cherry tinted with freshly cut grass. Yunho's presence eased some of his pain. Yeosang wasn't as isolated anymore. Still, it wasn't enough. Wooyoung made a mental note to scent as much of Yeosang's space before he left so he could really leave his mark behind.

"You can…," Yeosang trailed off, gesturing to his room in an open invitation to make himself comfortable.

Wooyoung didn't need to be told twice, jumping onto Yeosang's bed and laying down on his side. He patted the spot next to him invitingly. "I'll be here waiting, honey," he flirted.

Yeosang rolled his eyes, turning to head to his closet without a word. Wooyoung giggled to himself, having noticed the way Yeosang's cheeks had darkened in response. He wanted to coo and tease him further but he tempered his mischievous side down. Yeosang avoided eye contact as he headed to the washroom with a bundle of clean clothes in his arms.

"Hurry up," Wooyoung called after him, rolling off of his bed. He needed to get ready for bed too. He had already showered earlier and done his night time routine but he had yet to brush his teeth after drinking coffee.

When Wooyoung returned from Yunho's bathroom, Yeosang was still in the shower. Wooyoung decided now was the time to scent Yeosang's bedroom and infuse his scent in the space. He used to do this when he roomed with Yeosang all the time. His friend would always pretend to be annoyed but Wooyoung knew he hadn't truly been upset. He started with the closet, rubbing some of Yeosang's clothes against his scent glands. He focused particularly on the recognisable items, since they were things Yeosang wore often. As he was burrowing through the closet in search of Yeosang's favourite items, he came upon a familiar blue bunny.

"Oh! He still has you!" Wooyoung held the doll up into the light, turning it around to inspect it. Yeosang and him had won it at an arcade in a claw machine years ago, back when they were still in high school. It had taken multiple failures from the both of them until Yeosang had finally succeeded. He had offered it to Wooyoung but Wooyoung had turned it down, declaring he had rightfully won it. Despite how old it was, the bunny was still in great shape. After scenting it, Wooyoung made the executive decision that it didn't deserve to live in the darkest corner of Yeosang's closet and brought it out to his bed, flopping down beside it.

He rolled onto his side, scavenging in Yeosang's nightstand for a charger. They both shared the same phone model and, since Yeosang tended to lose things often, Wooyoung knew he always kept extra chargers. After plugging his phone in, Wooyoung lay on his back and held up the blue bunny.

"He took good care of you," he murmured to the relic of their past.

He missed those days, when everything had been so easy. His crush on Yeosang had been nothing more than a school boy crush, making it easier to be himself around him. Ever since his feelings had deepened, Wooyoung found himself constantly controlling his natural reactions, reading into every interaction and then doubting his scrutiny. It was exhausting. He remembered the early days, after they had begun presenting. Nothing had changed and yet, everything had. Everyone had presented as expected but Yeosang had shocked them all. In hindsight, they really should have known. They had been a hundred percent sure he would present as an omega and were taken aback by his beta presentation. When their mandatory lessons on their subgenders had begun, Yeosang had begun to behave differently and Wooyoung had been so confused. He remembered adamantly arguing with one of his teachers, unwilling to believe that Yeosang's changed behaviour was due to his subgender. And yet, that's what everyone insisted on and so, he started to believe it.

“Really?” Yeosang’s voice snapped him out of his dark musings and he panicked, worried his thoughts had affected his scent. A quick sniff relaxed him, his cinnamon scent only slightly spicy. Wooyoung lowered the bunny.

“You still have him,” he commented, placing it down carefully.

“You scented my things,” Yeosang said, brows furrowed in familiar annoyance. Wooyoung smiled. Yeosang really was much more expressive lately.

“Yes, really,” Wooyoung answered smugly. “I don’t like that your room doesn’t smell like me,” he huffed dramatically.

Yeosang had been drying his hair with a towel but, at Wooyoung’s words, he stopped and tilted his head like a confused puppy.

“Why should it smell like you?” Yeosang asked, face frighteningly innocent, as though there really was no reason his scent should fill the space. Wooyoung’s heart stuttered, his breath catching in his throat.

“What do you mean why? We’re a pack!” Wooyoung huffed, hurt. Yeosang raised his brows in surprise and Wooyoung quickly realised his mistake. “I mean… we’re- we’re best friends!” Wooyoung corrected, albeit sadly. It was still hard to accept that Yeosang was no longer a pack member. In all honesty, he didn’t think it would ever get easier. Every small reminder poked at the open wound on his heart, exasperating the pain, never allowing it to heal. He no longer had the comforting presence of Yeosang’s bond or the status of a pack family. They had reverted to just friends and, while Wooyoung was grateful he still had that, he needed more.

“Sure,” Yeosang said dismissively, going back to drying his hair. Wooyoung’s heart tightened.

“What do you mean sure? We are, aren’t we?” he asked, studying Yeosang’s face closely. Yeosang looked completely unbothered but Wooyoung could see a tightness in his expression that hadn’t been there before.

Yeosang shrugged. “Sure,” he said again, expression unmoving. Wooyoung frowned, uneasiness bubbling in his gut. Yeosang’s behaviour was almost contemptuous, like he was holding onto something that he didn’t want to voice aloud but was struggling to keep close to his chest. He wanted to dig out whatever it was, scared of the insinuation in Yeosang’s tone.

“Kang Yeosang! Stop saying sure like that! Why can’t you just say yes?” Wooyoung pressed desperately.

“Yes,” Yeosang said placatingly without a moment's hesitation.

The discomfort in Wooyoung’s stomach grew exponentially, spreading to his chest. Yeosang was being purposefully difficult. It had been so long since Wooyoung had seen him like this that he floundered, unsure how to react. Yeosang was normally calm, kind and easygoing. He was gentle in all his mannerisms and did his best to maintain peace. He rarely lost his temper,

far too worried about hurting someone's feelings. Outside of him, none of ATEEZ had ever seen him like this and Wooyoung wondered if this side of him was always specifically reserved for him. Wooyoung bit his lower lip, studying Yeosang closely. He was still drying his hair, studying Wooyoung with similar intensity, daring him to escalate it. Wooyoung closed his eyes and counted to three. He couldn't afford to meet Yeosang where he stood. He needed to keep his cool and handle things maturely before he accidentally pushed Yeosang further away.

The blank look on Yeosang's face was grating on his nerves though. Wooyoung gritted his teeth. He had already left his pack. Was he planning on truly leaving them all behind in every manner possible? Wooyoung could live without Yeosang being in the pack and even ATEEZ but he absolutely could not live a life without Yeosang in it. To see Yeosang looking like he didn't care which way things went fueled his anger and he had to put effort into maintaining control.

"Kang Yeosang," he bit out. "You swore on it. I'm your best friend! For life," Wooyoung said tightly. "Why are you being so weird about it?"

Yeosang turned away, refusing to hold his gaze. He casually tossed his damp towel on the back of his chair and took a seat. "I don't know," Yeosang mused. "Nothing about you has really screamed best friend in a bit."

Wooyoung's heart fell into his stomach. Despite the casual tone, Wooyoung felt the pain the words carried as Yeosang busied himself with preparing his skincare, still avoiding his gaze. He wanted to argue, to refute those words but Yeosang was right. He had lost sight of who Yeosang was just because of a label. He had ignored his own gut feelings hundreds and thousands of times, telling himself that this was just how betas were. If he had made an effort to have a real conversation with Yeosang, would things have gotten this bad? He'd distracted himself, throwing himself into his relationships with the other pack members since it had felt safer, easier. Now, he was faced with his biggest failure and he wanted nothing more than to shut it down.

Something must have happened with Yeosang before he came back. Maybe he'd had a talk with his parents or sister but, for the first time in years, Yeosang was ready to talk.

And yet, Wooyoung selfishly prayed he wouldn't.

He wasn't sure how to react, how to respond without coming face to face with his negligence. He couldn't afford to miss this opportunity though. Yeosang was currently on the precipice, ready to take a leap and air out his grievances, at least concerning Wooyoung. He couldn't let him step back tonight. Knowing Yeosang, he might not get to this point of bravery again. Too much had gone unsaid for far too long. He had spent far too long allowing Yeosang to push him away in the name of comfort. He was going to get his answers.

Wooyoung took a deep breath, steeling himself for whatever was about to come out. He had to remember to remain calm and open or Yeosang would shut him out. "I know, I'm sorry," Wooyoung apologised. "Can you tell me how your feelings have changed?" Wooyoung asked softly. He was done assuming things, projecting his own ideas into Yeosang's behaviour. He wanted to hear from the man himself exactly what his thoughts were.

Yeosang glanced at him furtively as he rubbed a cream under his eyes. “Everything,” Yeosang replied. Wooyoung’s heart thundered in his chest but he remained silent, waiting on Yeosang to continue. It seemed like Yeosang had already reached his limit though, refusing to continue unprompted.

“Everything, how?” Wooyoung pressed after a long bout of silence. Yeosang glanced at him through the mirror again, quickly looking away when they made eye contact. Wooyoung clenched his fists tightly at the sight of unshed tears. He wanted to get up, to wrap Yeosang in his arms and apologise over and over again but he wasn’t sure it would be welcome.

“It’s…,” Yeosang paused again, swallowing visibly. “I- I just don’t think that… I don’t think I’m a priority to you anymore.”

“Yeo-,” Wooyoung started to refute him but Yeosang rushed on, as though afraid to lose his courage.

“It’s kind of like that thing with San, except…, it was all of you. As soon- I feel like as soon as you all started dating, you,” Yeosang swallowed again. “You forgot about me,” he paused his cream application. “Well, maybe even before then,” he muttered softly, his tone barely a whisper.

Wooyoung could feel his heart being torn in half, nails digging into his palms to try and keep his composure. On a surface level, he had known Yeosang had felt neglected. He had gone through so much for so long without any of them recognising it. It was different hearing it out of Yeosang’s mouth though.

Noticing the tight expression on Wooyoung’s face, Yeosang quickly added, “Not that-, I don’t blame you guys for it. It’s just,” Yeosang smiled at him, his eyes carrying so much anguish that Wooyoung felt like he was choking on it. “Maybe it’s time we admit that we’re not who we thought we’d be when we were seventeen,” Yeosang finished, his tone carrying a finality that crushed Wooyoung’s heart.

Wooyoung rushed to Yeosang’s side, dropping to his knees before him. “Yeosang, I’m so, so, sorry,” Wooyoung didn’t know what to do other than apologise. “I know I get caught up in myself easily and that’s my biggest shortcoming. I should have been better to you. I should have paid closer attention. I should have noticed you were struggling,” Wooyoung carefully took Yeosang’s hand in his own, sandwiching it between his own.

Despair filled Yeosang’s gaze, vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. “It’s fine,” Yeosang gently pulled his hand out of Wooyoung’s grip. “If I had meant anything to you, you would have. But when I needed you more than anything, you were too-,” Yeosang stopped abruptly, dropping his head and taking a deep breath. Wooyoung choked out a sob, unable to hold back his tears at Yeosang’s words.

“No, no, it’s not like that,” he whimpered, reaching for Yeosang’s hands desperately again. Yeosang quickly stood, moving out of Wooyoung’s reach. “Yeosang-ah, Yeosang, please,” he clambered to his feet. “I was wrong, I know, I was. I- I don’t know how I could ever make it up to you but-,” Wooyoung’s rambling was cut off by Yeosang shaking his head repeatedly.

He grabbed a couple of tissues off his vanity and held it out for Wooyoung. Wooyoung stared at it dumbly, his apologies catching in his throat as tears streamed down his face.

“It’s okay, it’s fine. Forget I said anything,” Yeosang said sorrowfully, dabbing at his cheeks with the tissues as his own spilled over. “I’m sorry, it’s fine. Don’t cry,” Yeosang brushed at his own face harshly, ridding his cheeks of any wetness as he continued to wipe at Wooyoung’s cheeks.

“Sang-ah,” Wooyoung said weakly, throat burning and thick with emotion. Despite everything, here he was apologising to Wooyoung, as though he had been the one to wrong him.

“I’m serious, it’s fine,” Yeosang grabbed more tissues and held them out to Wooyoung. He took them numbly. “My feelings are my own problem. And it’s not fair of me to ask for more than you or any of the other guys can give…,” he trailed off again, looking up at the ceiling.

“Yeosang, I swear with everything that I am that you’re wrong,” Wooyoung swore vehemently, catching Yeosang’s face between his hands and forcing him to look at him. The sight before him wrecked him. Yeosang’s face was hot under his hands, the matching flush filling his cheeks with colour. His eyes were glimmering with tears he refused to allow fall. “Whatever it is that you want, you just need to ask. I can give it to you, I promise.” Wooyoung promised earnestly, swallowing past the heavy emotions. “I love you so much, it hurts,” Wooyoung couldn’t stop his eyes from tearing up as he spoke and he cut himself off, taking a deep breath. He couldn’t cry again and make Yeosang feel as though he needed to comfort him once more

“I-,” Wooyoung bit his lip to stop the words from pouring out. Wooyoung couldn’t take it anymore. He was done with all this secrecy and planning. Yes, there were definitely benefits to the pack’s current plan but, like all things, there needed to be room for flexibility. Yeosang had poured out what he could and now it was Wooyoung’s turn to reciprocate. The anguish in Yeosang’s eyes was unbearable and Wooyoung had run out of ideas that veered away from telling Yeosang the truth. His partners were all so worried about chasing Yeosang away but they had failed to consider that Yeosang was already halfway out the door. Maybe this would make him pause at least, to understand just how much he really meant to them.

Wooyoung steeled himself. Rejection couldn’t hurt more than this anyways.

Chapter End Notes

My goal was to have at least one person shed a tear so if you did, let me know!

Honestly, this chapter was really fun to write. I’m looking forward to your takes! 🥰🥰

Also, I try to do my best not to read the comments when I’m actually writing because I don’t want to be subconsciously influenced but I usually can’t resist the first day so like… if you’ve noticed I take forever to respond sometimes, this is why 😂

Yeosang

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday!

Quick thanks to my beta (every time I think this, I feel like I'm living in an omegaverse) reader for being so helpful and supportive. She honestly makes writing this so much easier (thanks darling 💙). This would be much messier without her lol.

Anyways, I hope you enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yeosang's body ached, despair woven into the very fabric of his being as Wooyoung cupped his face so delicately, swearing that he loved him. Regret had long consumed him, from the very moment Wooyoung's first tear had dropped. It sat heavily on his chest like it had a physical form, compressing his lungs. The weight was suffocating, choking him as he stared helplessly at the man before him whose eyes were pleading with him to just believe him.

If only he hadn't opened his mouth.

He thought it a blessing in disguise when he'd come home to Wooyoung, eagerly waiting for his return. The courage his sister had given him was still fresh in his blood. It had taken monumental effort on her part to encourage him to open up. She had sat with him in the park near their condominium for nearly three hours, advising him to just start with Wooyoung. His sister had always been his guiding beacon, her advice priceless. It was difficult to open up. She had understood that.And so, she had encouraged him to open up to the one person he trusted to be able to shoulder his burden, to understand his pain. Now though, as he watched Wooyoung fight to hold back tears, he wondered if she had been wrong. Yeosang couldn't handle his own emotions; why did he think Wooyoung would be able to shoulder them? Yeosang hated himself more than ever. Why had he lashed out like that? Wooyoung hadn't deserved the vitriol he'd spat, no matter how true the words had wrung.

Yeosang took hold of Wooyoung's forearms delicately. "I'm sorry," he said sorrowfully, trying to gently detach the hands on his face. He needed distance to regain control of himself. Wooyoung's face was infused with desperation and Yeosang knew he couldn't calm him down while he himself was so tightly wound up. Wooyoung immediately tightened his hold, refusing to let go.

"Don't you dare apologise," Wooyoung said roughly, his voice nearly a snarl. Yeosang flinched slightly, startled by the sudden switch. Wooyoung's eyes flashed, his determined gaze pinning Yeosang in place. "There's nothing you need to apologise for. I," Wooyoung sighed, hanging his hand for a second. "You're right. I was a shitty friend."

"No," Yeosang interrupted, shaking his head as much as Wooyoung would allow. "I was rude, you didn't deser-," Yeosang's words were cut off by Wooyoung's hand, muffling the rest of his words.

“Let me finish!” Wooyoung scowled, hand pressed tightly against his face.

Yeosang instinctively tried to break free, pulling back but Wooyoung was ridiculously strong in moments like this. Their scuffle came to half when Yeosang backed himself into a wall, trapped between the hard surface and the determined omega.

“Jung Wooyoung,” Yeosang narrowed his eyes, the words dampened and barely audible. “I’m trying to say sorry,” he argued. Despite the suppression, Wooyoung still understood his words.

"Well,” Wooyoung huffed, pushing his hair out of his eyes with his free hand. “Stop trying and I'll let you go!" Wooyoung scowled.

Yeosang blinked, staring at the determined man before him. Wooyoung was completely unwilling to listen to his apology and Yeosang could no longer tell if Wooyoung was still hurt by his earlier words. Seeing that he had stopped trying to speak, Wooyoung slowly pulled his hand away.

“So-,” Yeosang groaned as Wooyoung slammed his hand back over his mouth. Without thinking, he stuck his tongue out, licking Wooyoung’s palm.

“Yeosang!” Wooyoung cried out, yanking his hand away and wiping it off on Yeosang’s shirt.

The absurdity of the situation had Yeosang giggling, coughing quickly to cover it up. How had they ended up here? Just moments ago, Wooyoung had been crying and now, they were fighting childishly like two middle schoolers. Wooyoung’s puffy eyes widened and he pouted, pointing firmly at Yeosang.

"Don't laugh, I'm being serious!" Wooyoung cried out.

Yeosang shook his head, pressing his lips together to suppress his laughter, losing his composure immediately at the sulky expression Wooyoung was wearing. He looked up at the ceiling, carefully avoiding eye contact. It had always been this way with Wooyoung. No matter the severity of the situation, the smallest hair trigger could set him off, bringing him back to his carefree youth.

"Yeosang!" Wooyoung stomped, laughter infusing his tone. "Listen to me!"

“Okay, okay,” Yeosang agreed, still avoiding his gaze. “I’m listening,” he agreed. He wasn’t sure why he was feeling so giddy all of a sudden when not too long ago, it felt like his heart was splitting itself open. Wooyoung’s behaviour felt so refreshing. It felt like everyone had been treating him with kiddy gloves lately but Wooyoung charged in headfirst, open and unbothered. He both loved and hated this quality about Wooyoung. It was what had brought them so close together but also what had taken Wooyoung away from him. To have

Wooyoung behaving so comfortably familiar with him, even after everything he had said to him, made him feel like their situation just might be salvageable after all.

Wooyoung seemed caught off guard by his easy agreement, stepping back slightly. “Oh, um, I was going to say,” Wooyoung trailed off, looking around the room before settling back on him. “We need to dry your hair!” Wooyoung nodded firmly, reaching up to touch his head.

It was painfully obvious that Wooyoung had planned on saying something else but had changed his mind. Curiosity gnawed at him but he kept it to himself, heading to his vanity. Yeosang often slept with damp hair but he knew how Wooyoung felt about it. He was careful about his haircare, especially considering the amount of tempering it deals with due to their profession. To avoid unnecessary breakage, Wooyoung always made sure to sleep with dry hair. It had been a point of contention when they had roomed together. He used to get so annoyed when Yeosang would go to bed with it damp. It had been hard to function sometimes, especially with four withering bonds and a neglected omega, though he hadn’t been aware at the time. Oftentimes, Wooyoung would come sit on his bed and blow dry Yeosang’s hair as he lay, too exhausted to move after a long day. As he sat down to dry his hair, Wooyoung approached from behind, hand coming to cover Yeosang’s as he grabbed the dryer.

Yeosang looked at him through the reflection, trying to ignore their proximity. Wooyoung had practically moulded himself to Yeosang, their cheeks brushing lightly.

“Can I?” Wooyoung asked softly, meeting his gaze through the mirror. Yeosang’s heart stuttered nervously but he nodded, letting go of the dryer. He wasn’t sure why Wooyoung would want the chore but he was more than eager to hand over the task. He missed the feeling of Wooyoung’s fingers carding through his hair as he dried it for him.

“I miss this,” Wooyoung said, the words barely audible over the hum of the dryer. Yeosang stayed quiet, not sure how to respond. It seemed that Wooyoung didn’t expect him to.

“I miss spending time with you like this,” Wooyoung continued, eyes focused on Yeosang’s hair. “We should do this more often.”

Yeosang hummed in agreement, unsure what to do with the shift in the atmosphere. They really were all over the place today. Either way, Wooyoung purposely committing to spending more time together filled him with grief. At one point, this had come naturally. There had been a time when Yeosang hadn't taken a single breath without Wooyoung being there with him, taking in the same air. Now though, he was given a glimpse of what used to be and it hurt that this may never be their norm again.

"How's mom doing?" Wooyoung asked conversationally, referring to Yeosang's mother.

"Good,” Yeosang replied. “Her and Dad said to give everyone their regards."

"How come you stayed there for so long?" Wooyoung asked. Yeosang almost snorted. He would have stayed there longer if his parents hadn't been so pushy.

Truth be told, Yeosang had left his parent's house earlier than planned because of their constant badgering. He had gone there in a panic, scared to spend his free time with the pack, especially after he had scented Hongjoong last week. It scared him how easy it had been, how addicting it had become. He found he couldn't look at the Captain without wanting to be back there, face buried in his neck as he took in all the affection and sweet words he had so easily offered. In all truth, Yeosang was quite affection-starved. Something about that interaction had made it easier to relax and he found it getting harder to hold himself back. His family hadn't been happy when he'd come home. They had been adamant that everything had been a miscommunication and so it should be easy to fix. His father had almost driven him back to the condominium if it hadn't been for his sister's intervention. Eventually, though, she had worn him down and brought him back.

"Haven't seen them in a while," he responded selectively. "I missed them."

"You haven't seen me in a while either," Wooyoung countered, bending low and looking at Yeosang intently. "Didn't you miss me?"

Yeosang craned his neck, moving his head away. Wooyoung was far too close and he looked like he would try to steal a kiss soon. It had become almost second nature, after years of avoiding Wooyoung's affection. Though it had been years since Wooyoung had tried it off-camera, something about Wooyoung's demeanour made him instinctively alert. He floundered for an answer, too flustered to formulate a coherent thought.

"I saw you a week ago," he ended up saying. Wooyoung stood up with a pronounced pout.

"You're so mean," he huffed, returning to drying his hair. Yeosang couldn't help but smile at how familiar Wooyoung was behaving. Maybe his sister had been right after all. He had been concerned since Wooyoung had been so hurt earlier but he had bounced back quickly.

Wooyoung suddenly leaned over again and smacked a kiss on his cheek. Yeosang's eyes widened as Wooyoung stood with a satisfied grin. "I missed you. I always miss you. I miss you even when you're with me."

Yeosang's face heated up, growing noticeably red. Wooyoung cooed, his grin growing wider and he leaned down again, catching Yeosang's head to hold him put as he littered more kisses on his cheek. Yeosang wondered if he should complain, the way he did when Wooyoung behaved this way on camera. As he was debating this, Wooyoung stopped and stood once more and continued to dry his hair as though he hadn't just attacked him with kisses.

Yeosang was pretty sure his hair was dry but Wooyoung didn't stop. He continued to card his fingers through Yeosang's hair, the warmth from the dryer enveloping Yeosang softly.

"Young-ah," Yeosang spoke up after a moment. Wooyoung looked at him, a troubled look in his gaze. Yeosang swallowed his words. "Never mind."

Wooyoung was clearly stalling, dragging this out as he worked up his courage to say whatever it was he had held back earlier. Yeosang was exhausted and Wooyoung's gentle touches were making it difficult to remain alert but, still, he waited. It took another five

minutes before Wooyoung turned off the appliance, abruptly filling the space with silence. Wooyoung hugged him from behind, setting the dryer down in the same motion.

“I love you,” Wooyoung said softly, pressing their cheeks together as he looked at him in the mirror.

“I- I love you too,” Yeosang responded, his heart growing heavy as sadness overwhelmed him. He knew their declarations did not hold the same weight. His ‘I love you’ was an all-consuming declaration, intense and overwhelming. Wooyoung’s was carefree and light, with affection that was easily given to all of his friends. He had come to terms with the fact years ago. He would never know the love Wooyyoung gave to those he was in love with. He was okay with it; he had no other choice.

It still hurt though and had become one of the biggest reasons Yeosang knew he couldn’t stay. He would never overcome this if he was constantly surrounded by them. It had been easier to try and move on before when he had been a beta. Despite the agonising Alpha bonds, there had been distance, a line the others hadn’t been willing to cross. And even then, it had been impossible. Now, with their shift in behaviour, it has become utterly hopeless. Every sweet word tried to settle in his mind, to delude him into thinking that maybe, just maybe, they could come to love him the way they loved each other. He could not afford to fall deeper.

“You’re my best friend, my everything,” Wooyoung continued, his voice thick with feeling. “I just want you to know that I would do anything to make you happy, to see you smile. You know that, right?”

Yeosang turned, needing to see Wooyoung’s face, not just his reflection. “What’s wrong?” he asked, unable to read the emotions in Wooyoung’s eyes.

“I know I don’t deserve to tell you this, after everything I’ve done,” Wooyoung closed his eyes tightly, blocking him out. Yeosang cursed the fact that he had nothing else to go off of. Despite his odd behaviour, Wooyoung’s scent was relatively calm.

“You haven’t done anything,” Yeosang refuted, grabbing his hand. Wooyoung smiled sadly but shook his head.

"I let my fear control me.” Shame filled Wooyoung’s face and he lowered his head. “I didn't want to ruin what we had but... I kinda did anyway by pretending like nothing had changed when so much did."

"It's okay,” Yeosang interrupted, “you don't have to explain yourself."

Worry filled him at Wooyoung’s demeanour. He looked like he would cry again and Yeosang wasn’t sure he could handle that again.

"No, I have to say this now," Wooyoung shook his head. "I know Jongho made that mind-reader comment but it goes both ways. If I don't say it, how will you know?"

When Wooyoung lifted his head, Yeosang was surprised to see the level of resolve in his eyes. He braced himself for Wooyoung’s confession, hoping it wouldn’t hurt. He had no idea

what to expect. The suspense was terrifying. What had Wooyoung been scared of? What had changed so much that Wooyoung had to pretend it hadn't? Had Yeosang done something a long time ago? He racked his brain, trying to remember any point of contention they had ever had. They had barely fought over the years. Wooyoung must have really been holding on to this if he hadn't brought it up until now.

Wooyoung squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm in love with you," he blurted, the words so close together that Yeosang was sure he had misheard him.

"Huh?"

Wooyoung peeked at him out of one eye and, seeing what Yeosang assumed was utter bewilderment on his face, he opened the other eye.

"I'm in love with you," Wooyoung repeated, slower this time.

Yeosang's world came to a sharp halt. He had to have misheard him somehow.

"In love?" he asked. Wooyoung nodded. "With me?"

Wooyoung nodded again, his scent growing thicker as concern filled his face. "I mean, I know it's out of left field and you might not feel the same way about me but I just felt like you deserved to know why I've been so distant. I didn't want to make you feel awkward, you know, like especially since-," Wooyoung trailed off, shrugging and looking down. "I mean, I guess now I am making you feel awkward. I just thought that maybe I should explain myself," Wooyoung shrugged again.

"Oh," Yeosang nodded, completely unable to process any of his ramblings. Wooyoung was in love with him. "Do the others know?"

Yeosang knew how possessive the pack was with one another. They had made it very clear in the beginning that they were to not pursue any relationships outside of the pack.

"The others?" Wooyoung tilted his head, taken aback. "Oh! You mean the pack? Yeah, they know."

"And, they're fine with it?" Yeosang asked, completely befuddled.

"Uh…, why wouldn't they be?" Wooyoung looked just as confused as he felt.

"What do you mean why?" Yeosang jumped to his feet. "You guys agreed that you wouldn't have any relationships outside of the pack!"

"What do you mean 'you guys'? We all did!" Wooyoung defended himself. "Besides! Up until like a month ago, you were in the pack! I didn't do anything wrong!"

"We?" Yeosang tugged at his newly dried hair, pacing the room nervously. "Wooyoung, I was never part of the 'we'"," Yeosang explained.

There had been a lot of drama surrounding their beginnings. It had all begun on their first World Tour. They had all been quite newly presented and were still trying to learn to balance their heats and ruts with their professional careers. Wooyoung, unfortunately, did not meld well with most suppressants. As such, he had a special prescription that went missing during the tour and his heat hit full force. To make matters worse, they were unable to refill the prescription until they flew back to Korea but he could not fly during active heat due to airline regulations. He tried to ride it out but Hongjoong hadn't been able to stand hearing his suffering. Without their manager knowing, Hongjoong had decided that he would help now and deal with the consequences later. Wooyoung had eagerly agreed. Following the experience, the dynamics shifted completely. Though there were no feelings involved at the time, the line had already been crossed.

Not long after, Mingi had taken advantage of Yunho's rut to confess his feelings and the two of them started the first romantic relationship in the pack. Mingi chose to come off his suppressants now that he had an Alpha. However, there had been an unfortunate time when Mingi suffered from major anxiety. His heat was somehow triggered after a particularly intense attack but Yunho had been in his hometown. Mingi and Yunho had given Jongho permission to help only for Mingi to confess that it had felt like cheating because he had begun to develop feelings for Jongho. That was when the pack had the meeting and came up with their first rule. As long as they were comfortable, they were all okay helping each other out with their heats and ruts. Of course, since Yeosang did not experience either, he had remained silent.

That rule had further blurred the lines and, as they began to mix more comfortably, their feelings for one another had changed. Merely a year later, they had come up with the second rule. No relationships outside of the pack. However, since every confession had been so tightly intertwined with their secondary genders, Yeosang didn't find any room to step in. It didn't matter though, because he quickly realised the rule didn't cover him. One day, when drunk, one of his beta friends confessed to him. Although he turned him down, he had scented Yeosang after a few more drinks, mixing their scents intimately. When Yeosang returned to their dorm, no one seemed upset, instead asking how his date went.

Then, San started to get possessive of the pack. He would teasingly tell Yeosang to ' *go touch your boyfriend* ' anytime Yeosang got too touchy with any of them. With that, Yunho also started to growl more frequently and the others had picked up the habit. It had been completely downhill from there. And now, Wooyoung had confessed to liking him but, instead of feeling elated, Yeosang couldn't shake the fear. They were going to be so upset. San especially. He was very attached to Wooyoung. Would he hate him If he found out? Yeosang didn't know if he could survive San's hatred. He knew how cold he could be when he didn't like someone. If he were to ever face that empty stare, he might actually die.

"Yeo-Yeosang, look at me," Yeosang was yanked out of his thoughts by Wooyoung's voice. He hadn't realised it but he had started to hyperventilate.

"You can't," he told Wooyoung tightly. "You can't like me."

"I can and I do and they do not care," Wooyoung said, turning his nose up.

"Wooyoung," Yeosang tried to reason with him. "You know how they are."

“Exactly, so I know they don’t mind,” Wooyoung said firmly.

“The Alphas literally growl at me for looking at you wrong!” Yeosang snapped, losing his patience as his anxiety hiked up. He needed Wooyoung to take this seriously.

“Huh?” Seconds after, Wooyoung’s eyes widened as understanding hit him. “Oh.”

Yeosang nodded, relief filling him. “Exactly. We can’t.”

Wooyoung didn’t say anything, instead heading straight towards his bedroom door. Yeosang’s stomach tightened as he watched him go. He hadn’t expected Wooyoung to leave so abruptly, especially after dropping a bomb like that on him but he understood. He was just surprised at how much it hurt for Wooyoung to walk away so easily. He knew he could never compare to the other six men, but knowing and experiencing it were two different things. Of course, Wooyoung wouldn’t jeopardise his relationships with the others. He wasn’t worth it.

Wooyoung left his door open and so he followed him to close it, noticing belatedly that Wooyoung was heading for Yunho’s room. It was in the middle of the night.

“What are you doing?” Yeosang asked hesitantly. While Wooyoung often slept in everyone else’s rooms, he always made sure to go to bed at the same time as them so as not to interrupt their sleep. If they were already asleep, he would go to his room. Him heading to Yunho’s room had every alarm bell ringing in his head.

“To wake up Yunho,” Wooyoung answered.

Yeosang’s heart sank.

Chapter End Notes

No kiss AND a cliffhanger? 😔

Woo finally got to confess though!! 🥳🥳

Looking forward to seeing Soobin's name in the comments XOXO 💋

Yunho

Chapter Notes

> Alright, we've officially got all the members down so far so I was wondering if you guys could let me know which POV you would like to see after Yeosang's next chapter. Let me know in the comments!
>
> I hope you enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hun, wake up,” Wooyoung’s voice called out softly.

The light filtering into Yunho’s bedroom had woken him before Wooyoung spoke up but he had tried to ignore it, squeezing his eyes shut and turning to hide his face in his pillow.

“Yunho, baby,” Wooyoung said softly, his bed dipping as Wooyoung perched on the side.

Yunho opened his eyes, glaring into his pillow as he pondered on what could have possibly been important enough for Wooyoung to interrupt his sleep. He had been looking forward to sleeping in, without an alarm to pull him from his sleep.

“Mmm?” he grumbled, the warmth of his breath dampening his pillow. He lifted his head and turned to look at Wooyoung grumpily.

Yunho was not a morning person, everyone knew that. It took a while for him to wake up and he often walked around grumpily for a good thirty minutes before he could manage a smile. He was never the type to lash out but he did have a shorter temper, so he made sure to remain silent until he knew nothing he said would hurt his pack’s feelings.

“Yunho-ya,” Wooyoung whispered. “I need you to wake up, please.”

Disoriented, Yunho lifted his head, peering around until his eyes settled on Wooyoung’s shadowed frame.

“What’s wrong?” he asked worriedly, the tone in Wooyoung’s voice alarming him.

Before the omega could respond, Yunho’s senses were met with a familiarly tangy scent. He bolted upright, pushing the covers away from his body. “What happened?” he hissed, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. Yeosang’s scent had drifted into his room through the opened door, filling his space with the fresh, tart aroma of Yeosang’s fear. The lack of acridity in the scent still baffled him but, since learning what it truly meant, he was determined to never smell it again. His Alpha stirred, his protective instinct surfacing. Whatever was causing Yeosang to be afraid, he would find a way to fix it.

Wooyoung didn't answer immediately, looking between him and the door hesitantly. Yunho narrowed his eyes, impatiently taking in Wooyoung's body language. The omega was rocking on his heels, meeting his gaze with wide eyes.

"What did you do?" he asked, eyeing Wooyoung skeptically.

The shorter man was exuding guilt. He had definitely walked himself into a problem and came to Yunho to have him fix it. Part of him warmed at the revelation, his Alpha taking pride in Wooyoung's faith in him. The rest of him grew nervous, wondering if he could handle whatever Wooyoung was about to throw at him.

"I-," Wooyoung trailed off, hesitant to admit what he had done, worrying Yunho further. Yunho looked out into the bright corridor from the shadows of his bedroom, catching sight of the anxious omega in the hall. Yeosang looked frozen, like a deer in headlights, staring into the darkness of his room.

Yunho growled, turning to Wooyoung. He didn't have time to coax it out of the omega. "Jung Wooyoung," he said warningly.

Wooyoung's eyes widened in a panic and he brought a finger to his lips, shushing him. Yunho's chest rumbled again warningly but Wooyoung looked even more panicked.

"Shh, stop, don't growl," he whispered harshly, rushing over to try to physically silence Yunho. Yunho stopped the noise, caught off guard by Wooyoung's frantic reaction. Wooyoung glanced over his shoulder before looking back at Yunho. "Just, shh," he pleaded.

Yunho nodded in agreement, though thoroughly confused. "Why?" he murmured.

"Yeosang's scared of it," Wooyoung explained, glancing over his shoulder once again. He grabbed Yunho's hand and continued as though he hadn't upturned Yunho's life with those four words. "Come on, he'll just get more nervous the longer we're in here."

Yunho stumbled after Wooyoung, too shocked to do anything. Yunho automatically wanted to deny it but it explained everything. Yeosang's absolute terror, his anxiety, and his distrust. Yunho had single-handedly created every single one of these. After all, it had been him who had first noticed the pretty blush that spread across Yeosang's cheeks. It had been he who had pointed out the cute, soft chuckle Yeosang would make afterward, the way he would duck his head demurely and scamper away. He had started to do it whenever he exited the nesting room, desperate to see Yeosang flushed and flustered. His Alpha was hard to satisfy at those moments when all his baser instincts were at the forefront. Yunho was known for his mellow temper and friendly demeanour. When it came to Yeosang though, Yunho often fought to maintain a mild attitude. Yet, he'd managed to maintain firm control over his emotions for the most part. He was careful to never say more than he intended or to even hint at it. The only time his self-restraint ever faltered was after he had just exited a rut. He had thought it a harmless way to satisfy his own urges. Even after Yeosang's omega reveal, the dots had not connected. It all made perfect sense though.

The biggest question now was how did he explain this to Yeosang without sounding like a leering pervert.

“Wooyoung-ah,” Yeosang’s apprehensive voice pulled him from his thoughts. The pheromones rolling off of him were light and tart, the scent almost mouth-watering. Yunho’s stomach rolled uncomfortably as he took in the smaller man. Other than his scent, Yeosang’s face was clear of any expression and his arms fell neatly to his side. If Yunho hadn’t known this scent signalled Yeosang’s worst emotions, he would never have noticed the pure anxiety rolling off him.

“What’s wrong, are you okay?” Yunho pulled away from Wooyoung, moving closer to Yeosang. The latter flinched almost imperceptibly, Yunho only catching it because of how carefully he was studying him. He stopped in his tracks, heart tightening painfully. *He* was the one Yeosang was afraid of. He turned to Wooyoung, silently pleading with him for an answer.

“I confessed,” he blurted, smiling with exaggerated brightness to mitigate the weight of his words.

Yunho’s eyes widened, his jaw falling slightly as he whipped his head around to see Yeosang’s reaction. The omega tensed, looking down quickly.

In all fairness, Yunho wasn’t shocked. Caught off guard? Absolutely. However, it was a miracle that Wooyoung had made it this long without confessing. Wooyoung had been smitten with the omega for as long as he could remember. He’d noticed it immediately after Wooyoung had joined KQ but had ignored it. He had been far too focused on debuting for a crush to make it onto his radar. It had only gained importance when he realised that he had fallen for Yeosang as well. By then, he had already been dating Mingi and casually sleeping with Seonghwa and Wooyoung. It felt like one morning, he had woken up and just stopped seeing Yeosang as the sweet, kind, and cute beta he had to watch out for. Suddenly, everything he did made him want to hug him close and never let him go. Every coy smile made Yunho want to capture his mouth in a searing kiss. Every soft blush made him want to pin him underneath him and make him burn with pleasure. It had taken everything in Yunho to lock those feelings up and treat Yeosang normally. Wooyoung, however, had never been able to compartmentalize the same way. Yunho had been subjected to many of Wooyoung’s lengthy monologues on random nights on how precious Yeosang was and how, given the chance, he would take it.

It appeared he had been given the chance. And he had taken it.

Unsure of what else to say, Yunho just nodded. The others would be upset but Yunho could not find it in him to blame the omega. He had tried his best and Yunho knew he would not have acted thoughtlessly. Noticing Yeosang was still focused on the hardwood beneath his feet, he quickly verbalised his response.

“Oh, nice,” he said weakly, not sure what else to say. He had no idea how Yeosang had taken the information. Considering Wooyoung had come to him for help, he had to assume that it had not gone smoothly. “And… how do you feel about it, Yeosang-ah?”

Yeosang’s head shot up and he stared at Yunho dumbly. “Huh?”

Yunho looked between the two omegas, one clearly frazzled and the other looking sheepishly triumphant. Yeosang was clearly not okay with Wooyoung's confession but he could not figure out what had caused the fear.

"Are you okay with Wooyoung liking you?" he clarified, concerned. Yeosang never wanted to hurt anyone's feelings. Was he nervous to accept Wooyoung's affection? Or was he scared to turn him down? He didn't think Yeosang was polyamorous. When he returned after the break, he had voiced his discomfort with their polycule. Did he feel like he was being pulled into it by Wooyoung's confession? Or was he simply afraid that Wooyoung's confession would ruin their friendship?

His question only seemed to confuse Yeosang more, so he looked to Wooyoung for help. Yunho turned to look at him too, waiting for an explanation.

"He was worried you would be upset," Wooyoung explained. Noticing the lack of comprehension on his face, he clarified further, "he said I'm not allowed to date outside of the pack."

"Oh!" Yunho exclaimed, glad to find the crux of their problem. This was an easy fix. He turned to Yeosang, smiling for the first time since he had been woken up. "Oh, don't worry about that. Wooyoung's had feelings for you since you were in the pack so it doesn't count," he explained.

Yunho was tempted to squish his cheeks and gush at how adorable he was. Yeosang being concerned by semantics was quite on brand.

"And you're okay with that?" Yeosang inquired, looking at him as though he had grown a second head. Yunho glanced at Wooyoung, trying to understand what it was he was still missing.

"Uh, why wouldn't I be?" he responded slowly. Had he picked up on Yunho's feelings? Did he notice that Yunho was feeling jealous?

"Yeah, Yeosang, why?" Wooyoung asked, arms crossed and eyebrows raised pointedly. The question was purely rhetorical because Wooyoung turned to Yunho immediately after and began explaining. "Basically, somewhere along the line, he got the message that he was not part of the pack the same way we were."

Yunho wanted to bang his head on the nearest wall. Every time he thought he had caught up to whatever mess he had woken up to, something new was thrown at him. Not pack in the same way? "What does that even mean?" Yunho sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. It was far too early for his brain.

"He thought that the pack rule did not include him," Wooyoung spelled out.

It took a moment for Yunho to figure out what rule Wooyoung was referring to. They had plenty, ranging from things like 'Don't Take Clothes Without Asking' to 'No Guests in the Nesting Room.' He nodded slowly in understanding. Yeosang seemed to believe the "No Dating Outside the Pack' did not apply to him. In a way, Yeosang was right. They had never

held him accountable for breaking the pack rules, instead brushing it under the rug instead of dealing with the pain it had caused.

When Yeosang had started dating other betas, Yunho had only recently realised that he liked him. He had been utterly distraught and could not understand how Yeosang could so brazenly break the rule. It wasn't that he wanted Yeosang to be more secretive while doing so but the latter hadn't even tried to hide it. He'd been furious, as were some of the others. Hongjoong and Seonghwa then explained that betas tended to prefer mating with other betas. It was a biological tendency, they had claimed, much like their own attraction to their opposite sub gender. Of course, the conversation hadn't gone smoothly. San and Mingi had valiantly argued that they were all attracted to their own subgenders as well but, in the end, they'd come to the realisation that the exception was not the rule. And, to give Yeosang credit, he had never explicitly agreed to follow the rule; he had simply been present.

"I mean, we definitely let you break it," Yunho said diffidently, rubbing the back of his head as his attempted smile came out as a grimace. "But that doesn't mean it changed anything for the rest of us," he told Yeosang.

Yeosang's face visibly soured. "Let me break it?"

Yunho's heart sped up in alarm. He had hoped he had reassured the omega but Yeosang looked upset at the revelation. "Why? What's wrong?" he asked.

"I didn't," Yeosang mumbled.

Yunho glanced at Wooyoung.

"Didn't what?" the omega asked Yeosang.

"I've never broken any pack rule," Yeosang said, louder, jutting his jaw out.

"What do you mean you-," Wooyoung looked at him, his face mirroring the shock on Yeosang's face.

"What about Hyeongseop?" Yunho asked, heart, hundering against his ribcage.

"Ew," Yeosang said immediately, scrunching his nose in disgust. "Hyeongseop's my friend."

"Friend?" Wooyoung echoed emptily, looking at Yunho in complete stupefaction.

Yunho was at an absolute loss. "So, you've been single this entire time?" he asked, needing this in as clear terms as possible. He was not about to leave any room for misinterpretation.

Yeosang blushed darkly but gave a curt nod.

"Fucking hell," Yunho breathed, tugging on his hair to feel something other than the rock in his gut. All this time, he had assumed Yeosang was seeing other people. He'd recently learned that Yeosang was a virgin after learning about his mistaken presentation but he'd still thought that Yeosang had at least been going out during all these years. Yeosang often went out and would come back smelling like other betas, most often Hyeongseop. Their scents

were often mixed quite intimately afterwards and he'd believed that this was due to the nature of their relationship. To find out now that, this entire time, Yeosang had remained single due to the pack ruling hurt more than the idea of Yeosang breaking the rule. They had completely isolated him and then left him alone.

"Sang-ah, I-," Yunho's throat hurt but thankfully, Wooyoung took over. He threw his arms around Yeosang's neck, pulling him flush in the tightest hug he could manage. Yunho could hear Wooyoung breathing a multitude of apologies as Yeosang looked at him in confusion over his shoulder.

"Sorry about what?" Yeosang asked, hands coming up to comfortingly pat Wooyoung's back.

"For thinking you broke the rule," Wooyoung sniffled, clinging to him tightly.

"And for making assumptions without clarifying things with you," Yunho added dejectedly. Every conversation he had with Yeosang just further highlighted how terrible their communication had been up until this point. He was trapped in a maze of misunderstandings, too lost to even recognise what had been misunderstood until he walked straight into it. Nothing he knew to be true seems to be correct anymore but he wasn't even sure where to start to unravel the mess they found themselves in.

"Is that why you guys…," Yeosang trailed off, losing confidence before finishing the full question.

"Didn't make a move earlier?" Wooyoung pulled back, gently cupping Yeosang's face in his hands. Yunho felt his stomach roll at the ease with which Wooyoung touched the omega. He wished Yeosang would allow him to hold him as freely but he finally understood why Yeosang did not feel at ease around him. He had only himself to blame.

Yeosang shrugged slightly, lashes lowering to the ground.

"Sang-ah," Wooyoung said softly, taking his chin between his fingers and tilting his head back. "Forget everything else. Just look at me," he coaxed.

Yeosang's eyes flickered to Yunho tentatively before meeting Wooyoung's gaze. Even from this distance, Yunho could see the timidity in his eyes. He exhaled slowly, not wanting his own emotions to distract Yeosang.

"I'm going to give you three seconds," Wooyoung said softly, "and then I'm going to kiss you." Yunho's eyebrows almost shot up but he held it back at the last second, keeping a neutral expression as Yeosang glanced at him again. He did his best to come off as unassuming, casual even. His heart thundered in his chest as he grew nervous on both of their behalf.

"One," Wooyoung murmured, leaning in slowly. Yeosang's whole body was tense but he didn't pull away, pleasantly surprising Yunho.

“Two,” Wooyoung bridged the gap, closing the space between them carefully. From Yunho’s vantage point, they looked as though they had already connected. He only knew they hadn’t because Wooyoung had yet to finish his countdown.

“Three.”

Chapter End Notes

"IT WAS YUNHO'S FAULT?!?! ANOTHER CLIFFHANGER?!?!" - me guessing your reactions to the chapter.

Anyways, looking forward to your thoughts about this one.

Also, there won't be an update two weeks from now. I'm going to be going on a trip and won't have free time to write 😔 I'm going to be struggling to make next week's update already so I can't push the second week.

Sorry 😭🙏🏽

I'll try not to leave Yeo's chapter on a cliffhanger lol

Yeosang

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry, I know this is short af. Less a chapter, more a scene 💔

Happy Monday?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wooyoung's declaration nearly made Yeosang's heart stop. He froze completely, chin held firmly between Wooyoung's fingers. Yeosang knew there was barely a difference between their heights yet, at this moment, Wooyoung felt larger than life. His heart beat steadily, pounding against his ribcage forcefully until it was almost painful. He had no idea how to respond. He knew what he wanted to do: he wanted to throw himself at Wooyoung and kiss him until he could no longer breathe. Yeosang just wasn't sure that's what he *should* do.

"One," Wooyoung began the countdown.

Yeosang stared at the man before him. Was he really going to do this? He would be crossing a line he'd never even neared before. Until a few minutes ago, he had been a thousand percent sure that his feelings were unrequited. Now, Wooyoung stood before him, barely an inch between them as he counted down to Yeosang's first kiss.

"Two," Wooyoung's voice softened as he grew closer. As his face neared, Yeosang's heart increased its pace. It still blew his mind how pretty Wooyoung was. He tried not to but his eyes fell to Wooyoung's mouth. His lips were perfectly plump, beaconing him closer with soft promises. His eyes flickered back to Wooyoung's, surprised to find they were intensely focused on his own mouth.

"Three," Wooyoung whispered, their noses brushing lightly.

Yeosang hadn't known how he was going to respond until he actually did. He squeezed his eyes shut, unable to handle the intensity of the moment, but didn't pull away. He could feel the warmth of Wooyoung's breath fanning him. At the last second though, Wooyoung turned his head. Yeosang's eyes flew open when he felt Wooyoung's lips press against his cheek, dangerously close to his mouth but still not close enough. Before disappointment could take over, Wooyoung smirked and leaned in. He nearly gasped, a jolt of pleasure stabbing at his abdomen as Wooyoung finally kissed him.

Yeosang had always imagined Wooyoung's kisses to be as intense and animated as he was. He was surprised to find Wooyoung's kiss almost painfully gentle, soft lips coaxing Yeosang into responding. Their mouths melded perfectly as Yeosang hesitantly returned the kiss. Wooyoung tilted his chin further, bringing him closer as his other hand slid around Yeosang's waist. Wooyoung's mouth was intoxicating, warm and sweet and so inviting. His cinnamon

scent enveloped Yeosang in the softest embrace, warming his chest until Yeosang felt tears burn at his eyes. When Wooyoung broke the kiss, Yeosang unconsciously followed him, chasing after him pitifully. Wooyoung's face showed clear surprise but he quickly closed the space again, peppering him with gentle pecks until Yeosang pulled back shyly.

He'd nearly forgotten about Yunho's presence but Yunho's scent had gotten stronger, a heaviness Yeosang wasn't familiar with lurking under the scent of freshly cut grass. He quickly peeked out at him, curious as to how he would react now that he knew he would not get mad. His expression was more familiar. His eyes had darkened and the tips of his ears had gone red. It reminded Yeosang of the times when Yunho returned from one of the other dorms, smelling strongly of one of the other pack members. For a brief moment, Yeosang found himself wishing that Yunho would get jealous; not of Yeosang, but of Wooyoung. He wanted the Alpha to want him as well. Yeosang quickly pushed the feeling down, reminding himself to not get greedy. Wooyoung liked him back. That was enough. It would have to be.

Catching Yeosang's gaze, Yunho quickly cleared his throat and straightened up, his face relaxing. "Well, I'm going to go back to bed then," he gestured to his room, albeit awkwardly.

"Already?" Wooyoung asked, stepping away from Yeosang. Yeosang suddenly became aware of the coolness in the room, the draft chilling him. He wanted to step closer to the omega but felt nervous, not wanting to be seen as needy.

"It's really early," Yunho nodded. "You guys should get some rest too."

"Okay, goodnight," Wooyoung said. "Thanks," he added softly. Yunho smiled and crossed the hall, towering over Wooyoung. Wooyoung expectantly lifted his head, accepting Yunho's goodnight kiss. Yunho paused in front of Yeosang and then awkwardly waved.

"Night."

"Goodnight," Yeosang replied, just as softly.

As Yunho walked to his bedroom, Wooyoung linked their arms together and watched him go, giggling. "He's so awkward."

Chapter End Notes

I mean… no cliffhanger?

I'm really sorry 😢 This trip has me so much busier than I expected. I've barely had an hour to myself outside of sleep and working 😭

I didn't want to leave y'all with last week's cliffhanger an extra two weeks so this is just the finished scene.

On a brighter (darker) note, I lost my wallet 5 hours into my trip so that was fun.

P.S. there is still no upload next Monday 😬 You guys can hate me but just for a week, okay 🥺😭

Yeosang pt. 2

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday 🥳

As you can see, we're still on Yeo's POV 😅 The last chapter was so short af and, I tried moving on but every time I wrote, Yeo was speaking to me so I just let him have it lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yeosang awoke feeling refreshed and well rested. Sleeping had been a struggle for the longest time, he had come to accept it as his new normal. He'd expected last night to be the same. As a matter of fact, he'd expected it to be even harder. Yeosang had been nervous to sleep with Wooyoung after the kiss but the latter had behaved regularly, curling up under his sheets and pulling Yeosang close. He'd gone to bed cocooned in Wooyoung's arms for the first time in years and knocked out after just a few strokes of his hair. He rolled over, expecting to see Wooyoung and was met with an empty bed.

Yeosang sat up, looking around the open bedroom. He was tempted to go out in search of Wooyoung but decided to at least wash up first. At least that way, he wouldn't seem too much like an abandoned puppy. As he brushed his teeth, he wondered what he would say. While Wooyoung had confessed last night, Yeosang had been too shocked to respond. Even after the kiss, he hadn't been able to verbalise his feelings. And, if he was being honest, Yeosang wasn't sure he wanted to say anything just yet. It felt too raw. He was terrified to put it out there, even though he logically knew there was no reason to be. Deciding to just go with the flow, Yeosang braced himself and twisted the door handle.

The moment his door opened, the scent of the full pack hit him.

He peeked into the hall, catching a glimpse of the living room. He could hear their voices drifting towards him, too layered to be distinguishable. A sharp pang of anxiety coursed through him, tightening his throat. Were they talking about him? About last night?

"Oh, Yeosang-ah," Yeosang nearly jumped as a voice came from behind him. "I was just coming to get you," Seonghwa smiled, glancing past him at the living room. Relief flooded through Yeosang. Seonghwa's presence was a calming force, filling him with familiar safety in moments of turmoil. He felt the urge to cling to Seonghwa, to let him guide him through whatever was waiting in the living room. But instead, he just nodded, trying to mask his nervousness.

Seonghwa grabbed his hand and tugged him in the opposite direction. "Come, I warmed up breakfast."

Yeosang followed easily, eager for any excuse to delay the inevitable. The dishes on the table were still steaming, hot and ready. Seonghwa pulled out a chair for him and gestured for him to take a seat.

“Thanks, hyung,” Yeosang smiled, sitting down.

When Seonghwa reached out to ruffle his hair affectionately, Yeosang ducked slightly, successfully avoiding the tousle. Seonghwa pouted slightly, giving him a side eye as he sat down beside him. Yeosang pretended not to notice, feeling slightly guilty about his avoidance. It wasn’t that he didn’t want Seonghwa to touch him—far from it.. Rather, he disliked the insinuation that came with the head pat. Over the years, it felt as though he had never aged in Seonghwa’s head. Seonghwa still treated him with the same kiddy gloves he had always used. If their relationship had been different, Yeosang knew he would not have minded the coddling. He just resented their current status and could only express it this way without getting caught.

“Eat,” Seonghwa reminded him, propping his chin on his palm as he watched Yeosang. Seonghwa’s expression had tightened almost imperceptibly but Yeosang noticed it. Not wanting to disappoint the elder further, he picked up his spoon and tasted the kimchi stew in the centre of the table.

“Mmm, did Sannie make this?” Yeosang asked, trying to focus on anything other than the gnawing uncertainty.

Though the Alpha’s had all taken classes together, over the years, they had all developed their own cooking styles that were easily recognisable. The stew tasted like San’s work.

“Yeah, he brought it up with him,” Seonghwa responded, catching his chin suddenly. Yeosang stilled, allowing Seonghwa to wipe the corner of his mouth. As expected, the tightness in Seonghwa’s face vanished and he smiled softly. “Always so messy,” Seonghwa murmured, licking the sauce off his thumb. Yeosang quickly looked away, trying to hide the heat in his face at the intimacy of the action. It was such a small thing, but it felt like too much, like it exposed the ache he was trying so hard to hide.

“Why is everyone here?” he asked conversationally. The group didn’t regularly gather like this and the fact that it happened right after his kiss with Wooyoung did not sit too well with him.

“Hongjoong called a pack meeting,” Seonghwa replied, filling his glass with water. Yeosang’s eyes widened and he turned to Seonghwa in shock. Noticing his panic, Seonghwa quickly patted his thigh reassuringly. “It’s fine, it’s not a big deal. Joongie just wants to discuss something.”

“Is he mad?” Yeosang asked tentatively, his appetite waning. He hated how weak he sounded, how he automatically sought reassurance from Seonghwa like a lost child. He habitually sought out Seonghwa’s bond, mood dropping further when he came up empty. He delicately placed the chopsticks down and turned to Seonghwa helplessly.

“What? No, of course not!” Seonghwa turned as well, grabbing Yeosang’s chair and trying to pull him closer. Yeosang felt a small, amused smile tug at his lips when the chair barely budged. Seonghwa huffed in frustration and adjusted his own seat instead, manoeuvring so that Yeosang’s legs were trapped between his own. “You trust hyung, right?”

Yeosang nodded instinctively. He did; more than any of the others. Maybe it was because Seonghwa had always been the most consistent, the one constant in his ever changing world. When Yeosang had pulled away due to the Alpha’s possessiveness of the pack omegas, the others had mirrored his behaviour. Seonghwa had been the only one to remain unmoved. He hadn’t pushed, but he hadn’t pulled back either.Sometimes, Yeosang wished Seonghwa would push just a little more, would demand something from him that would force him to speak up, but he never did. Instead, Seonghwa had simply stayed, a steady presence on the edge, always there if Yeosang needed him. For so long, he had been his only refuge.

There had been countless times when Yeosang had sought him out for comfort without ever admitting it, allowing himself the quiet reassurance of Seonghwa’s presence. Sometimes, he would just reach for his bond and other times, he would simply sit within Seonghwa’s vicinity, feigning nonchalance. There was something in Seonghwa's calm, unwavering presence that grounded him in a way nothing else could. A feeling of solace he had yet to find elsewhere.

“Then I promise everything is fine,” Seonghwa reassured him, taking Yeosang’s hand into his own. “The others are all happy for you and Wooyoung.”

Yeosang tried to take comfort in Seonghwa’s words, but his stomach still churned nervously. He nodded, trying to convince himself as much as anyone else. Seonghwa smiled and patted his thigh encouragingly before leaning back. “Are you done?” he asked, gesturing to the food. Yeosang glanced at the barely touched meal. His stomach was too knotted up to handle another bite and so he nodded.

“Okay, come on then, let’s get this over with,” Seonghwa stood and held his hand out expectantly.

Yeosang stared at the offered limb, puzzled. Not wanting to leave Seonghwa hanging, he took it gingerly as he stood. “Where are we going?”

“Huh?” Seonghwa matched his confused expression. Yeosang tugged slightly on their joint hands in response. “To the living room?” Seonghwa answered, his tone turning upward at the end, as if unsure himself.

Yeosang peeked out into the hall before leaning closer to the elder omega. “It’s a pack meeting though,” he whispered, gently pulling his hand free. Perhaps Seonghwa had forgotten the rules but no outsiders were allowed at those.

Understanding flickered across Seonghwa’s face before he sighed, snatching Yeosang’s hand again. “Pack plus you meeting,” he remedied, giving Yeosang’s hand a gentle tug.

This time, Yeosang followed, though a bit reluctant. He worried about the meeting agenda. If it wasn’t about Wooyoung’s confession but he was still involved, that meant it was still

related to him.

As they entered the living room, Yeosang noticed that the rest of the pack had already settled in. He was reminded on the day he had returned to the dorm, following the bond breakage. Like before, the majority of the pack had all piled up on the sectional, with little regard for personal space. Yeosang looked around carefully, trying to gauge the atmosphere. There were snacks on the coffee table and the speaker was playing low, background music. Jongho was perched on the edge, close enough in proximity but avoiding touching any of the members. Across from them, Hongjoong sat in an armchair with Mingi on the floor beside him. The omega was resting his head on the Alpha's knee as Hongjoong mindlessly rubbed his shoulder soothingly. Yeosang grew uneasy seeing that. Mingi only did that when he was very nervous.

As Yeosang took in the mingled scents of the house, he realised that everyone, except Seonghwa, seemed tense and on edge. He unconsciously tightened his hold on Seonghwa’s hand, only noticing when Seonghwa squeezed lightly in return. Since Wooyoung was in the middle of the sectional, pinned down by both San and Yunho, Yeosang stuck close to Seonghwa, trailing behind like a freshly imprinted duckling.

All eyes were fixed on them as they crossed the room, Seonghwa heading for the second armchair. He lowered himself onto it without releasing Yeosang’s hand, leaving Yeosang standing beside him unsure of where to go. Just as he started to grow anxious, Seonghwa gave his hand a little tug, drawing his attention. Yeosang looked down at him and, when Seonghwa patted his thigh invitingly, Yeosang took it thoughtlessly, needing the comfort Seonghwa’s presence always offered.

As he did, Yeosang caught the surprised look on San’s face and came to his senses. Embarrassed, he moved to get back on his feet but Seonghwa's arm quickly circled his waist, pulling him back down.

“Stay with me?” Seonghwa asked, breath brushing against his ear warmly, making him even more frantic to get away from the omega. “Please?”

The soft plea made Yeosang pause and he looked over his shoulder at the older man. Seonghwa had resorted to pouting again, looking adorably pitiful with his large brown eyes silently pleading with him. Yeosang gave in, perching carefully on Seonghwa’s thighs. Seonghwa grinned and squeezed his waist tighter, pulling him closer. Yeosang glanced around, taking in the reactions of the Alpha’s quickly. Yunho was pointedly looking away, his gaze fixed somewhere in the distance. San had a slight pout on his lips, his head resting on Wooyoung’s shoulder as he eyed the two of them with mild displeasure. Jongho looked faintly amused, one corner of his mouth curved up in a barely-there smile. When Yeosang's eyes met Hongjoong's, the elder gave him a gentle, reassuring smile.

“Alright, perfect, now that everyone is here, the meeting is officially in session,” the head Alpha announced, clapping his hands. The already silent room grew quieter as everyone straightened in their seats.

“First things first, I believe congratulations are in order?” Hongjoong began, phrasing it as a question and looking to Yeosang for confirmation. He shrugged, unsure how else to respond

since he still hadn't yet confessed to Wooyoung. He glanced over at Wooyoung and saw him nodding in agreement. Hongjoong watched their exchange with curiosity before giving a small shrug himself. "Alright then, you two can figure that out on your own time."

"Secondly, Yunho wanted to bring something to the pack's attention," Hongjoong continued, shifting the focus to the tall Alpha.

Yunho cleared his throat and smiled weakly. "I mean, there's a couple of things I wanted to talk about. I think we can all agree that we've done a pretty terrible job of communicating and relying on assumptions so I want to clear the air with all of us here."

Yeosang glanced at the others curiously but, aside from Hongjoong, they all seemed just as lost as he was. Then Yunho turned his gaze directly to Yeosang, his eyes intense and unwavering.

"Sang-ah, I'm really sorry. For everything. I shouldn't have assumed you broke the pack rule and-," Yunho began, but Jongho quickly cut him off.

"What pack rule?" the maknae asked, his tone curious. Yeosang wanted to roll over and just die. Last night's revelation seemed to have stuck in Yunho's mind and, while he appreciated the effort Yunho was putting into trying to clarify past misunderstandings, he couldn't help but feel mortified. The rest of the pack already weren't interested in him but now they would think that neither was anyone else. Last night, he had just felt aggrieved, not really caring if they knew the truth. Now though, he wished he had kept his mouth shut.

"The dating ban," Yunho clarified, still not breaking eye contact. Yeosang looked away, his eyes dropping to the hands still resting around his waist.

"Wait, you weren't dating anyone?" Mingi asked, lifting his head from Hongjoong's knee. "This whole time?"

Yeosang's face burned with an odd mixture of shame and vindication. Seonghwa's grip tightened around his waist, and his citrusy scent grew stronger, clearly an attempt to soothe him.

"Yeah, he said so last night," Wooyoung interjected.

"I'm sorry too, Yesang-ah," Hongjoong added softly. Yeosang peeked at him from behind his hair, catching the Alpha's regretful expression. "I should have brought it up with you instead of brushing it under the rug," the Alpha admitted, looking defeated. "It's all my fault, in all honesty."

Yeosang shook his head quickly. "It's not, I'm fine," he insisted.

"Don't just say it's fine when it's clearly not," Jongho chimed in, sitting up straight, his voice filled with concern.

"Jongho's right," San agreed with a nod. "I know you don't want to make things worse, but it's important to us that you're honest about how you feel. It's hard to know how to act when

you keep saying everything is okay."

Yeosang shifted uneasily, feeling the pressure building around him. He could sense all eyes on him now, their gazes heavy with expectation. Mingi quickly spoke up, noticing Yeosang's discomfort. "That's not fair," he frowned, sitting up straighter. "That's a lot to put on Sangie."

He shifted slightly on Seonghwa's lap, feeling the comforting warmth of the elder omega behind him, but he still felt exposed, vulnerable. He knew they expected him to speak up but the weight of their eyes felt like a physical pressure, and it made him feel small, unsure of what to say. His gaze flitted from one face to another, before finally settling on Wooyoung. The graveness on Wooyoung's features softened as they made eye contact before Wooyoung took it upon himself to speak up, pulling their attention from him.

"Look," Wooyoung began, his voice gentler than usual, "at the end of the day, some things are just common sense. I'll admit, I've been really self-absorbed and haven't always thought things through. But I also think we've been focusing too much on Yeosang's subgender because it was easier than having more difficult conversations about how we've been treating him."

Wooyoung's words lingered in the air, thick with a tension that seemed to seep into every corner of the room. Seonghwa shifted beneath Yeosang, his scent a mixture of surprise and discomfort, mirroring the expressions of those around them. Yeosang's heart pounded in his chest. He hadn't expected Wooyoung to articulate what he had been feeling, especially since Wooyoung hadn't seemed aware of the issue the last time they spoke. As the silence stretched, Yeosang braced himself, his heart pounding. No one could refute Wooyoung's words and, while it should have brought Yeosang comfort at finally being seen, it filled him with sorrow.

"It's fine," Yeosang dismissed it as the tension in the room grew more palpable. Just as the words slipped past his lips, he remembered Jongho's earlier words.

Jongho's eyes narrowed, and he let out a low growl, frustration clearly evident. Yeosang flinched at the sound, his body instinctively reacting with a tremor of fear. He clenched his fists, trying to stop the trembles. Seonghwa's arm tightened around him protectively, his voice soft but firm. "Jongho," he warned, shooting the Alpha a pointed look.

Jongho immediately looked regretful, but before he could say anything, Yunho slumped back in his seat, a sigh escaping his lips. "That's the other thing," Yunho said weakly, rubbing his temples. His words barely settled in Yeosang's consciousness, his focus fixed on regaining control of his limbs. He hated the intensity of his reaction, especially since Jongho's growl could barely classify as one.

"Yeosang, honey," Seonghwa whispered, his voice filled with concern. He waited for Yeosang to meet his gaze before continuing gently, "Did Jongho scare you?"

Yeosang hesitated, considering denying it. He didn't want to make things worse, but under Seonghwa's earnest stare, he found it impossible to lie. He gave a small, ashamed nod. "Sorry," he mumbled, feeling a flush of embarrassment creep up his neck.

A wave of shock swept through the room, several curses murmured under their breaths. Seonghwa hugged him tighter and linked their hands, rubbing his thumb soothingly over his wrist.

San's voice was filled with a tentative hope as he asked, "Did you get scared every time we growled, or is this just since we haven't been bonded?"

Yesoang hesitated to respond, wondering if he should tell the truth or not. He could feel the heaviness of the room pressing down on him, the guilt and regret emanating from his former packmates. His silence spoke for him though and Yunho sighed heavily, dropping his face into his hands.

"And that's why you stopped touching us," Mingi murmured, realisation dawning on his face. Yeosang bit his lip, torn between comforting the omega and speaking his thoughts. He held back, not wanting to hurt them the way he had accidentally hurt Wooyoung the night before.

Yunho stood up and crossed the room to kneel in front of Yeosang, a pained expression on his face. He gently placed a hand on Yeosang's knee. "I'm so, so sorry, Yeosang-ah. Last night, Wooyoung explained that the growling scared you. And, in retrospect, it makes perfect sense."

"Oh, um," Yeosang glanced at Wooyoung, surprised that he had noticed his fear just off a passing comment. "It's fi-," The word nearly slipped out, but he hesitated, casting a wary glance at Jongho, who was unsuccessfully hiding an endeared smile.

"No, it's not," Yunho said. "It was a crappy thing to do and, even if I thought it wouldn't bother you much because you were a beta, I still should have been more considerate. I-," he said softly, his voice thick with regret. "I never wanted to make you feel like that. None of us did."

Yeosang let out a small, forced chuckle, trying to lighten the mood even just a little. "It's okay," he murmured, squeezing Yunho's hand on his knee in reassurance. "I shouldn't be scared of something like that anyway."

"It's totally natural to feel afraid," Jongho said firmly. "Especially with our bonds being so frail. You didn't have a reason to trust we weren't being hostile."

Seonghwa pressed a soft kiss to Yeosang's temple, his voice soothing. "And you never have to apologise for your feelings," he whispered. "We should have noticed sooner. Especially since you had such a visceral reaction."

Yeosang shook his head, face burning from the affection Seonghwa gave so easily. He wanted to argue that Seonghwa had only noticed because he was seated on his lap. Yeosang knew he was good at minimising his reactions so that they weren't observable.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter ends quite abruptly but ngl, I just quit writing loool😭😭😭 I was fighting for my life (shark week) and I met my target word count.

Anyways, I hope you enjoyed the chapter. 😘😘

Thank you for waiting and being so patient these past two weeks 🥹 I really appreciate all the support you guys have shown me and this fic 💚💚

I look forward to hearing your thoughts!

XOXO 💋

San

Chapter Notes

> Ngl, I almost didn't finish this. Your girl is on (another) trip and juggling the time difference, work and travelling has been exhausting. Wrote this so last minute my beta only had enough time to look at the first half of the chapter (if you notice a mistake, point it out please lol)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

San's heart raced as he took in the sight of Yeosang lying beneath him, flushed and covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Yeosang's brows were furrowed, his eyes squeezed shut as he struggled to maintain control. He was breathing harshly, chest rising and falling as he strained with the effort it took to finish his last set. The sight was breathtaking, and San had to remind himself to focus. He couldn't afford to lose concentration now, not with the omega so close to his limit.

"Come on, just one more," he encouraged. His hands hovered inches below the bar, ready to catch it at the slightest sign of failure.

Yeosang whined, a desperate plea for relief that San was both desperate to answer and equally anxious to prolong. He bit his inner cheek harshly, forcefully reigning in his thoughts as he watched Yeosang determinedly force the bar up. For a heartbeat, San thought he might have to step in, muscles tensing in anticipation. Yeosang successfully finished the set, the bar coming into contact with San's hands as Yeosang silently asked for help. San caught the bar and quickly racked it, the sound of metal on metal ringing through the empty gym.

Yeosang lay beneath him, chest still heaving, his gaze victorious and a small grin toying with his lips. San couldn't help but to return this smile, reaching for the bottle of water Yeosang had set down earlier.

"I told you you could do it," he praised enthusiastically, offering Yeosang the bottle. Yeosang sat up, pushing his damp hair out of his eyes and smiling wholeheartedly, an expression San hadn't seen in a good minute.

"I wasn't sure; it's been so long," Yeosang said heavily, still trying to catch his breath. "My arms are shaking," he chuckled, the tremble made obvious as he brought the water bottle to his mouth. San squeezed his shoulders and down his arms, gently massaging the probably sore limbs. He had invited Yeosang to work out after leaving him alone for a few days so that he could spend time with Wooyoung since it seemed they still had things to sort out after the kiss. He hadn't expected to feel as sidelined as he did, gut burning with jealousy as he watched other members of his polycule get along with the omega in a way that didn't leave space for him.

San had always thought his relationship with Yeosang to be pretty solid. Unlike the others, who were pretty smitten by the omega from almost first sight, San had felt pretty neutral. They didn't seem to have much in common, and while Yeosang was nice and cute, there wasn't much else to him. And so he'd busied himself with the more excitable members of the group. As time passed, though, and as he learned to look past the first impressions, he'd found himself falling fast and hard for Yeosang. They got closer with time and by the time they had decided to become a pack, San had been absolutely smitten.

So now, as he witnessed Wooyoung, who was the most similar to him in terms of love language, get to constantly hug, kiss, and dote on Yeosang the way he wished he could with every fibre of his being, San found it unfathomably difficult. Even the other omegas seemed to have made progress in tandem. San hated it. He hated the way jealousy churned his guts when Seonghwa wrapped an arm around Yeosang's waist, pulling him close offhandedly. He hated the way Mingi could easily pull Yeosang in for a crushing hug when he got excited. But most of all, he hated the careful way Yeosang always glanced at him whenever any of the omegas took liberties with him. San knew he wasn't great at controlling his facial expressions. That's why there are countless fan compilations of him staring intently at his pack, sometimes sweetly and other times simmering with heat. And he knew that every time Yeosang glanced at him, he would undoubtedly catch San's jealousy starkly etched into his features.

San squeezed Yeosang's shoulders again, a little tighter this time, the touch grounding him as his thoughts spiraled. Yeosang glanced back at him, a slight furrow in his brow.

"I'm good, thanks," Yeosang said, rolling his shoulders to loosen the remaining tension. "Do you want to do your set?"

"I'm done for the day," San replied, dutifully dropping his hands. "I did arms and back yesterday. You ready to hit the showers?"

Yeosang nodded, a satisfied smile spreading across his face. San knew he was happy to be working out again. San knew how much Yeosang enjoyed the gym—the rush of pushing his limits, the satisfaction of feeling his muscles grow stronger. It was something they shared and what San had fallen back to in a bid to close the growing gap between them. They walked to the communal showers together, discreetly stripping off their clothes with practised ease before stepping into separate stalls. The stalls only came up about a third of their height, allowing them privacy but to still see each other’s faces. The sound of rushing water filled the space, a steady white noise that drowned out any awkwardness.

San fumbled with his shampoo bottle, the slick plastic slipping from his fingers and clattering loudly to the floor. He cursed under his breath as it rolled away and reached for it, only to kick it accidentally, sending it skittering across the tiles. Annoyed, he let out a low growl, the low sound echoing off the shower walls louder than intended. Worried, he glanced over his shoulder. He saw Yeosang standing motionless under the spray, suds clinging to his hands and hair. It only lasted a second though, before Yeosang resumed his task, scrubbing at his scalp nonchalantly.

San retrieved the bottle and returned to his spot, silently musing over yesterday's conversation.

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San carefully studied Yeosang's uneasy expression, watching as his eyes darted across the room nervously. He was no longer comfortably perched on Seonghwa's thighs, instead looking sheepishly mortified as Seonghwa tried to reassure him that his fear was completely natural. It was obvious he wanted to shrug off the attention and downplay his fear, but the others wouldn't let it go.

"Sang-ah, I really am sorry," Yunho said contritely. "I know it's a stupid reason, but I honestly only ever growled because you're really cute when you blush," he confessed. San nodded in subtle agreement as Yeosang flushed once again, said blush spreading over his cheeks at Yunho's words.

"If we knew it scared you…," Wooyoung started, his voice trailing off. They all sat quietly for a moment, the weight of their errors hanging heavily in the air.

"It's okay," Yeosang broke the silence with a forced chuckle. "It's fine, really."

Jongho suddenly stood from his seat on the edge of the sofa, his movements abrupt and tense. Yeosang instinctively shrank back into Seonghwa, eyes tight with contrition as though he had done something wrong. Jongho faltered, a sad look fluttering over his features before he steeled himself and continued his approach. Through their bond, San could feel Jongho's tension, but his expression remained composed as he reached down and pulled Yeosang from Seonghwa's lap. Yeosang's surprise was clear, his mouth opening in silent shock as Jongho used brute force to lift him, arms wrapping around Yeosang's torso. San sat straighter, worried that Yeosang would react poorly. Instead, Yeosang wrapped his arms around Jongho's neck, making it easier for him to hold him, though he couldn't suppress a startled protest.

"Jongho-ya," Yeosang said, his voice catching. "What're-,"

"I just want to," Jongho grumbled, carrying the stunned omega back to the sectional. Seonghwa laughed, shaking his head at the maknae's boldness as he triumphantly sat down, manoeuvring Yeosang so that he sat sideways on his lap. San watched, stunned as well. The spoiled display was truly something only Jongho could get away with. Yeosang's face and neck were flushed a deep red as he sat carefully on Jongho's lap, confusion tinting his expression. Jongho, however, had calmed considerably. His scent had been simmering, slowly starting to smell burnt as the conversation unravelled but with Yeosang in his lap, it returned to the familiar, comforting aroma of freshly brewed coffee…

"It's totally natural to feel afraid," Jongho said gently, his eyes lingering on Yeosang's scent gland, though he visibly held back from acting on the instinct to nuzzle closer. "Especially with our bonds having been so frail. You didn't have a reason to trust we weren't being hostile."

"So basically, by treating him like a beta, we've done the exact opposite of everything he needed us to do," Mingi said with a heavy sigh.

"I hate all of you," Wooyoung said sourly, lightly pushing San off his shoulder. San pulled back, hurt lancing through his chest at Wooyoung's harsh words. Mingi's hurt echoed his own through their bonds, and Wooyoung, feeling their distress, softened slightly, a flicker of regret in his eyes. "I told you I should try," he muttered.

"I know," Hongjoong soothed, his voice steady as he stepped in to control the rising tension. Yeosang glanced between them, confusion flickering in his eyes but San and the rest of the pack were keenly aware of Wooyoung's sentiment. He dropped his head shamefully. as Yeosang looked between them in confusion. "I'm sorry, Young-ah. And Yeosang. We're all sorry," Hongjoong emphasised the collective apology. "I don't know how we can even begin making it up to you, but I promise we never meant to hurt you."

"I know it'll probably be hard to trust us again, but do you think you can try?" Seonghwa asked softly. Yeosang squirmed, clearly uncomfortable and overstimulated by the happenings in the room. Recognising this, Jongho hugged him tighter, encouraging him to rest against him. Yeosang slouched slightly, leaning into Jongho's broad chest as the contact subdued him. San watched the scene unfold, his heart heavy with the weight of his own failings. How had they remained so blind to Yeosang's true sub-gender for so long? Watching the way Yeosang found so much comfort in physical touch had his stomach rolling with guilt. He must have been willfully blind.

"Does that include reconsidering coming back to the pack?" Mingi asked hopefully, his voice tinged with desperate optimism. Yeosang tensed, but San couldn't blame the tall omega for his eagerness.

"C-can I think about it?" Yeosang asked weakly.

San blinked in surprise. He had expected a panicked refusal similar to the last time. Judging by the silence, the others were just as surprised.

"Of course," he agreed readily, the other members quickly echoing his sentiment. Yeosang smiled tightly as he carefully extricated himself from Jongho's lap.

"Then… I'm going to go shower," Yeosang said, moving stiffly as he backed out of the living room. He was clearly running away again but no one made a move to stop him, still stunned by his response.

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"Yeosang?" San started, ducking under the spray and closing his eyes to hide from Yeosang's reactions. The suds from his hair melted down his face, forcing him to keep them shut.

"Hmm?" Yeosang's response was faint, almost drowned out by the sound of running water.

"Do all growls scare you now?" San asked, the question hanging heavy in the air. Silence followed, stretching a moment too long. San couldn't help but peek one eye open, ignoring the sting of the shampoo. He needed to see Yeosang's face. The omega's expression was tight, eyes fixed on the shower wall before him.

"You noticed?" Yeosang asked, surprise evident in his tone. The omega's expression was tight, eyes fixed on the shower wall before him. San's heart sank, mood plummeting as he took in Yeosang's reaction. Clearly, Yeosang had grown accustomed to his fear flying beneath his radar.

"I-," Yeosang scrubbed his face with a deep sigh. "A little. I'm trying to get over it," he admitted, his defeated tone violently ripping a San's heart. He quickly rinsed his face so he could pay Yeosang better attention.

"Hey, no, that's not something to feel embarrassed about. It's totally natural to feel nervous about growls," San said, his voice cracking with emotion. "And... I haven't exactly given you any reasons to feel safe." The admission weighed heavy on his chest. He had done a lot of retrospection since Yeosang had left the pack so suddenly. The consisted guilt twisted painfully in San's chest. He had prided himself on reading people well, especially those he cared about, yet there was Yeosang, everything hidden so neatly just barely beneath the surface. And he had missed it all. San recalled all the moments he had dismissed as nothing, the small flinches and hesitations he had always chalked up to something else, never once considering that his actions or those of his pack could possibly be the cause.

Yeosang's eyes widened and he shook his head firmly. "You don't make me feel unsafe," he insisted, his words rushing out as if to reassure San.

"You don't feel safe around me either though," San pointed out the obvious omission. Yeosang lowered his gaze guilty.

"I-," Yeosang bit his lip nervously, biting back his words. San remained silent, hoping it encouraged him to finish his thoughts and was surprised when it worked. "I guess I just get a bit nervous sometimes," Yeosang confessed. "Like… maybe you'll think I'm trying to steal them from you."

San cursed inwardly, not having expected the years of playful growls to come bite him in the ass like this. Clearly, he'd been extremely short sighted, focused solely on instant gratification. His lack of reaction must have alarmed Yeosang, who immediately rushed to explain.

"Not that you do! It's just I know you can be a bit possessive, and that's not a bad thing, it's just." He was rambling now, looking more panicked the longer he spoke. His eyes flicked nervously to San, searching cautiously as though afraid his words would hurt San.

And they did hurt—but San would take that fact with him to the grave. He couldn't make Yeosang worry about him. Not when it was his fault that Yeosang believed the bullshit he was spouting.

"They're just as much yours as they're mine," San cut him off. Yeosang looked at him with wide eyes, taken aback. "You can't steal something that already belongs to you."

For a moment, Yeosang's expression darkened, his brows knitting together as though San's reassurance had only dredged up doubts and insecurities. His expression cleared before San could process it.

"Then... why do you always look at me like that?" Yeosang asked carefully, his voice uncertain.

"Like what?"

"Like," Yeosang paused, "you're... jealous?"

"Because I am," San admitted, the truth slipping out before he could think about it. Both their eyes widened in surprise.

"I thought you said...," Yeosang trailed off, his hesitation palpable.

San took a deep breath, steeling himself. "Yeah, I did. And I meant it. But…" San hesitated, torn between the urge to be completely honest and the fear of scaring Yeosang off. He wanted so badly to tell Yrosang the truth but he wasn't sure how he would react. He'd seen how Yeosang had responded to Wooyoung's confession, but their dynamics were different. Would Yeosang be receptive? San bit his tongue. Probably not. San had accidentally burned far too many bridges for Yeosang to respond similarly.

"It's okay, you don't have to force yourself," Yeosang said, his tone strained as he tried to sound reassuring. "I'll be more careful."

"Careful?" San echoed dumbly. Yeosang nodded brightly, misinterpreting his reaction as encouragement.

"To not do anything that will make you jealous," Yeosang clarified. San barely restrained a frustrated snarl, letting out a loud groan instead. Yeosang still flinched.

"I told you, that doesn't bother me," San said stiffly, struggling to keep his voice even since Yeosang looked nervous again. He turned off the shower, the cooling water no longer worth the discomfort, and wrapped a towel around his waist. His mind was racing too much to finish his shower here; he'd finish at home. Yeosang's timid expression gnawed at his heartstrings, and San realised he couldn't keep skating around the truth.

He decided in that split second that honesty was better than dancing around the truth, especially if it would ease Yeosang's concerns. Wooyoung was right—what did they have left to lose? The worst had already happened when Yeosang left the pack.

"I'm not jealous of you, I'm jealous of them," San threw caution to the wind and blurted out the truth.

"Of them?" Yeosang repeated dumbly.

San's resolve wavered as the weight of his confession hung between them. No doubt, the latter would remember all the liberties he'd taken with him over the years. The hugs, the kisses, the playful fights for possession with their fans. All of it would finally hold meaning to Yeosang as well and San didn't want to be there when the epiphany hit. He'd thought he could handle this, that he could be calm and collected, but now that the truth was out there, he felt unbearably exposed. The fact that he was only in a towel did not help. Embarrassment

coursed through him, hot and suffocating, burning away his composure. San couldn’t stay, couldn’t face the weight of his truth in Yeosang’s eyes—so he spun on his heels and bolted from the showers without a word

Jongho was going to have a field day with this.

Chapter End Notes

Tried my hand at another flashback since the last chapter ended so abruptly.

I'm so sorry I haven't gotten to your comments from last week. I've read them all but I didn't have the time to reply. I almost took another break but your comments helped me push through it.

Thank you for all the support.

Yeosang

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday everyone. Thanks for tuning in to another chapter 😘

I hope your week goes great 🫶🏽

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yeosang stared blankly at the door San had disappeared through, the cold water from the gym showers still beating down his back. San's cocoa scent lingered in the air, its usual sweetness now tinged with a spiciness that made it clear how uncomfortable he had been. Frowning, Yeosang replayed San's words in his head. San was jealous? But jealous of what? His pack? Why?

Yeosang struggled to make sense of it. If San had singled out Wooyoung, Yeosang might have assumed he was jealous in a romantic sense. But he had said he was jealous of *all* of them. For the life of him, Yeosang couldn't figure out what made San feel that way towards the others. Confused and distracted, he finished the rest of his shower, thoughts racing as he tried to piece together a puzzle with several missing pieces.

As Yeosang dressed, unease settled over him at the thought of walking home alone in broad daylight. Sure, he had a mask, but he knew his fans could still easily recognise him if they looked closely enough. The thought of calling a manager for a ride briefly crossed his mind, but he quickly dismissed it. It was just a ten-minute walk. He would manage.

Still, it took him nearly ten minutes to gather the courage to leave the changing room, his cherry scent subtly sharp with anxiety. He mentally cursed himself for not bringing any scent blockers. To his surprise, when he finally stepped outside, he found San casually leaning against the side of the building, arms crossed, his eyes fixed on the pavement.

"San-ah," Yeosang called out, his relief evident. San's head whipped up at the sound, and his eyes locked onto him. Like Yeosang, San was wearing a mask, but he also had a baseball cap pulled low over his head.

San straightened as Yeosang approached, his posture stiff. His brows furrowed with concern as he quickly looked Yeosang over. Without a word, San grabbed Yeosang's wrist and gently turned him, his hand firm but careful as he searched his body.

"Are you okay? What happened?" San asked, his voice filled with concern.

"Huh?" Yeosang blinked, momentarily confused, before realising it was his scent that had triggered San's worries. His chest warmed at the thought. It was still new to him, having the

pack react so quickly to his emotions now that they had familiarised themselves with his scent profile.

The change was as comforting as it was strange. For so long, Yeosang had felt so alone, confused as to why they didn't seem to care. It had taken time for him to realise they simply didn't know what it meant, and by that point, Yeosang had already withdrawn within himself and was comforted by the fact that he could hide his emotions in plain sight. He only had to watch for his physical tell signs but he could get away with most things as long as his bond was closed off. Now, they were hypervigilant, with every slight change in his scent seemingly noticed. It warmed the long-neglected corners of his heart, the parts of him that had yearned for this kind of attention. But there was a bittersweetness to it too. Maybe all of those years would have been easier if he had trusted them with his heart. He swallowed the ache, pushing it down where it wouldn't surface.

"Oh, it's nothing," Yeosang shook his head, brushing it off with a soft smile.

San's eyes narrowed as he glanced back at the building, still holding Yeosang's wrist firmly. "Did someone say something to you?" he asked, a protective edge creeping into his voice.

"No, no," Yeosang quickly shook his head. "I was just… a little nervous about walking home." He tried to downplay it, not wanting to make San feel bad, but San's eyes still widened in surprise.

"You thought I left you?" San asked, his voice tinged with a hurt that made Yeosang's heart twist.

Yeosang ducked his head, guilt tightening his chest. In hindsight, of course, San would never leave him stranded. Even back when they had thought he was a beta, San had always been protective of him in public. Now that he knew Yeosang was an omega, it made even less sense to assume San would just leave him.

"I… you just left," Yeosang shrugged, unable to refute San's words.

San exhaled audibly and looked up at the clear sky for a long moment. "Let's just go home," he said softly, his voice devoid of its usual energy. When he looked back down, Yeosang could see the visible defeat in his eyes, and it unnerved him. He simply nodded, unable to shake the feeling that he had somehow made things worse.

The walk home was quiet. San stayed close, as usual, ensuring he was always between Yeosang and the road. He paused to pet a familiar street cat and offered a polite greeting to the owner of their favourite food cart, but he didn't say much to Yeosang. With every step they took toward their condo, Yeosang's heart raced a little faster.

Once they went their separate ways, he knew whatever was brewing between them would fester. Time would distort and dramatise it, making reconciliation even harder.

Unfortunately, Yeosang couldn't pinpoint exactly what was wrong.

Was San upset that Yeosang had assumed he left him? Or was this about the jealousy San had confessed to earlier? Both were equally possible and yet, equally damning. What if he mentioned the wrong one and further exacerbated the situation? He bit the inside of his cheek, trying to push down the growing ache in his chest as he watched the space between him and San widen further.

By the time they reached the lobby, Yeosang still hadn't gathered the courage to say anything. His mind raced, but his mouth stayed firmly shut. He silently followed San to the elevators and stood stiffly beside him as San pressed their floors. His heart lodged in his throat, frustration clawing at his chest. Why was it so difficult to start the conversation? Why couldn't he confidently address the rift that had ripped open between them? His eyes burned with unshed tears, and he felt a sudden wave of helplessness wash over him.

When the elevator reached San's floor, San stepped off with a quiet goodbye. Yeosang nodded in return, his gaze fixed on the floor, unable to meet San's eyes. As the doors slid shut, Yeosang's shoulders slumped in defeat. Before the doors could close completely, a hand shot out, holding them open. Yeosang looked up, startled, meeting San's determined gaze. His heart skipped a beat as San stepped back inside, brows furrowing with concern the moment he noticed his eyes glistening.

"Sang-ah, I'm not mad," San said quietly, his voice a mixture of reassurance and weariness. "I just… I need some time to gather my thoughts. We'll talk later, okay?"

Yeosang nodded grimly, anxiety twisting in his stomach. What would San want to discuss later? The uncertainty gnawed at him, and though San's words were clearly meant to comfort him, they left Yeosang more worried than before. Before stepping out again, San leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to the side of Yeosang's face, his lips lingering in an apologetic gesture that made Yeosang's chest tighten further.

By the time Yeosang entered his apartment, the silence that greeted him felt suffocating. It was always quiet since it was just him and Yunho, but today it felt oppressive. Kicking off his shoes, he let out a heavy sigh, the post-workout glow completely extinguished by the weight of the interaction with San.

"Sangie?" Mingi's voice came from Yunho's bedroom, and moments later, the taller omega appeared in Yeosang's line of sight. He was dressed in bright red shorts, his hair tousled from what had clearly been a restful nap. The sleep lines decorated his cheek and forehead, but his soft brown eyes were filled with concern. "What's wrong?"

Yeosang harshly wiped at his face, those two simple words cracking something open in his chest. A tear fell before he could stop it. Ducking his head, he muttered, "Nothing, I'm going to change," and tried to brush past Mingi.

Mingi stepped in front of him, blocking his path. He stared down at Yeosang, eyes scanning his face. "You're crying," he stated, his voice still thick with sleep. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

Yeosang sniffled and wiped his cheeks again, embarrassed by the flow of tears that suddenly seemed unstoppable. He wanted to tell Mingi it was nothing, that he was fine, but his words

failed him. Mingi didn't hesitate, pulling Yeosang into his arms and hugging him tight. His scent, warm and comforting, enveloped him as Mingi rubbed soothing circles on his back.

"Shh, it's okay," Mingi whispered, his voice gentle. "Everything's going to be fine, I promise."

The words pierced Yeosang's heart, making him want to believe in them, but how could Mingi promise that when he didn't even know what was wrong? Even Yeosang couldn't figure it out. He held his breath, trying to stop the sobs that threatened to escape, feeling ridiculous for breaking down like this in front of Mingi.

"I'm fine," he finally managed, pulling back and wiping his face again, though the tears seemed determined to keep coming. "It's stupid. Don't worry about it."

Mingi frowned, shaking his head. "It's not stupid, Sangie. You don't have to act like you're okay when you're not. It's better to let it out. Keeping it inside won't help, trust me." His voice was soft but firm, carrying the weight of someone who had learned the hard way. Yeosang knew he spoke from experience. Like him, Mingi had struggled with anxiety, but it had gotten better over the years with the pack's support and regular therapy.

Yeosang felt his chest tighten at Mingi's words, guilt and frustration mixing with the ache in his heart. Mingi's understanding gaze made it hard to hide, and at that moment, he wished he could just release the weight pressing on him. He wanted to be as open as Mingi, but years of pretending had made it difficult.

His lower lip trembled, the words right on the edge of his tongue. Mingi only needed to murmur a soft "It's okay, just tell me" before Yeosang blurted out the earlier happenings with San. He nervously recounted San's confession, the confusing emotions it stirred, and the awkward, heavy silence that followed. By the time he finished, Mingi's face was etched with understanding.

"So, he said he was jealous of us?" Mingi asked, brows furrowing as he tried to piece together what Yeosang had said.

Yeosang nodded, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. "Yeah, but... I don't understand why. And then he left but didn't leave, and then I got sad when I thought he left, and I… I don't get it," Yeosang breathed out heavily, relieved to get it all off his chest. Maybe Jongho and the others were right. Now that Mingi was here, listening and trying to help him make sense of it, Yeosang felt a bit of the weight lift.

Mingi smiled and carefully lifted the gym bag off Yeosang's shoulder. "Come on, let's get some liquids in you," he said, gently redirecting the conversation as he led Yeosang into the kitchen. Yeosang followed obediently, gratefully accepting the glass of water Mingi handed him.

"I think I know why San acted like that," Mingi began, watching Yeosang closely for his reaction. When Yeosang nodded, Mingi continued. "You know how San is… he's pretty much an open book. Straightforward, always says what's on his mind, and he's super protective of us. But with you..." Mingi paused, his expression growing more serious. "He

blames himself for a lot of what happened when you left the pack. We all feel guilty, but San... I think it hit him a bit harder."

Yeosang looked down, the words sinking in. Yeosang had had conversations with a handful of the members about the happenings of the past month but he hadn't had the chance to talk to San. Hearing how his actions had affected the Alpha weighed heavily on his heart. He hadn't expected it to affect anyone else when he'd done it. He'd been on the brink of insanity, the pain and the constant second-guessing overwhelming him. He's naively assumed that, like him, they would be better off.

"And I think when you thought he left you today, it hurt him because that's exactly what he's afraid of—that he lost your trust." Mingi continued, voice softening, his eyes filled with concern. "San would never leave you behind, Yeosang."

Yeosang nodded in agreement, the guilt returning in full force. "I didn't mean to make him feel like that," he whispered, rubbing his hand over his face. "I know he wouldn't leave me… but… I guess I just panicked."

Mingi nodded. "I get it. You've been through a lot, and it's hard to undo that kind of damage overnight," he said, hugging Yeosang from behind. "We've put you through a lot," he corrected himself.

The words "It's fine" hovered on the tip of Yeosang's tongue, but he swallowed them back. He was trying to be more honest with himself and the others, and brushing things off carelessly had never seemed to serve him well before. Mingi's chin rested lightly on his shoulder, warm breath puffing softly against Yeosang's ear as he watched him quietly. The extended closeness felt strange. Mingi had never been particularly touchy with him, at least not for this long. His hugs were usually brief and playful, like when he'd excitedly spin Yeosang around after winning a game. But this was different. The moment had shifted from casual to something deeper, teetering on the edge of intimacy.

Yeosang didn't want to pull away, though. Mingi's touch was the only thing keeping him grounded, his concerns about San too close to the surface. He worried that the tears he had just managed to swallow would resurface the moment he was out of the omega's hold. So, he stood still, waiting for Mingi to grow tired of the embrace, hoping the warmth between them would keep his worries at bay, even if only for a moment longer.

Chapter End Notes

So San's confession went nowhere 😅 (Honestly, I was going to have San not say anything at all but my beta fought for y'all's rights lool)

Anyways, let me know your thoughts 🥰

Mingi

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday?

I know, I know, this is a late update. I'm sorry 😞

My brother got me sick and so I ended up writing late and had to give my beta some time to edit as well so… here we are 🤦‍♀️😩

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mingi rocked on the spot, Yeosang swaying with him effortlessly in his embrace. Yeosang felt so warm against him, their cheeks brushing slightly. He could smell the anxiety clinging to the smaller omega, the scent oddly pleasant to his senses despite its bitterness. It still baffled him how, even in distress, Yeosang's scent remained tantalising. He tightened his hold, continuing the swaying motion he hoped would help dispel Yeosang's anxiety. He tried hard to suppress his own growing unease, his mind running with scenarios of where things had gone wrong.

San leaving without fully calming Yeosang was completely out of character. San prided himself on caring for the pack, and unless something was seriously wrong, he would never have left Yeosang so abruptly. Had San hurt himself? Did something happen to one of the other pack members?

The sudden chime of Mingi's phone shattered the fragile silence, jerking him out of his spiralling thoughts. Yeosang flinched, blinking out of the daze he'd slipped into while Mingi held him. He quickly withdrew from Mingi's arm with a dark blush.

"I'm going to make a shake," he mumbled, avoiding Mingi's eyes.

Mingi nodded, offering him a small smile as his hand itched to reach for his phone. It pinged repeatedly in his pocket, each notification making his pulse spike. As soon as Yeosang disappeared into the kitchen, he snatched his phone out of his pocket. He had multiple notifications from a barely used group chat, the chat that alerted when someone had entered their cycle.

Opening the app, Mingi took in the SOS message Seonghwa had sent, letting them know that San had started his rut earlier than expected. Mingi's stomach twisted at the unexpected news. San's rut had arrived three days ahead of schedule, and San's were never off by more than a day.

His gaze flickered toward the kitchen, where Yeosang moved quietly. The thought of leaving him alone like this made Mingi's chest tighten. Yeosang's tart cherry scent was still thick in

the air. But San could be uncontrollable during his ruts, especially if he felt incomplete without everyone present. Yeosang's absence would already have him on edge. If Mingi were to stay away as well, it could push him over the edge.

He skimmed the rest of the chats. Wooyoung and Jongho were already on their way up, and Yunho was almost back from the corner store. Even Hongjoong, who was still at his studio, promised he'd be there in 20 minutes. At least the others would be there soon.

Mingi took a deep breath and forced himself into motion, mind still racing. As he stepped into the kitchen, the sight awaiting him twisted his heart. A tray sat on the counter, stacked neatly with seven cups. Mingi's throat tightened, and a familiar sadness filled the pit of his stomach. Seven always felt like the wrong number. This was also the first time he had witnessed Yeosang preparing the tray, and the vision was painfully lonely. Yeosang shut the fridge, a large water jug in his hand. He glanced at Mingi, face carefully void of any emotion.

"You can take this with you," he said flatly, placing the jug on the tray before turning back to grab his blender.

Mingi shifted on his feet, unsure how to respond. He had never been good with reading emotions, especially Yeosang's, whose moods were like subtle shifts in the wind: hard to read, impossible to predict. He had thought things were improving, thought that maybe the distance between them had been shrinking, but now, faced with Yeosang's flat detachment, he doubted himself.

The kitchen buzzed with the low hum of the blender, a stark contrast to the cacophony of thoughts racing through Mingi's head. He clenched his fists, nails digging into his palm to ground himself. He couldn't spiral with Yeosang. He was supposed to be the one providing comfort right now.

The front door opened with a beep, and Mingi immediately caught the scent of San's cocoa-rich pheromones, now overpowering with the onset of his rut. The tension in the air thickened instantly. Yeosang glanced over his shoulder, surprise flickering across his features before it was quickly replaced by a mask of indifference. They could hear the soft murmurs from the hall as Seonghwa gently coaxed the grumbling, whining alpha towards the Nesting Room. The door closed behind them with an audible click, leaving Mingi and Yeosang in silence once more.

"Why aren't you going?" Yeosang's voice broke the silence, quieter than before.

Mingi hesitated. "He has hyung with him right now."

Yeosang looked at him oddly but just nodded, placing the blender in the sink.

"Does it bother you?" Mingi asked hesitantly.

Yeosang turned back to him, and confusion etched on his features. The expression soothed some of Mingi's nerves, no longer facing the measured, expressionless Yeosang.

“Does what bother me?” Yeosang asked. He sat down gracefully at the table, taking a slow sip of his shake as he waited for Mingi to respond. When he pulled the cup away, foam from the protein shake clung to his upper lip. Mingi instinctively reached out to wipe it away, but before he could, Yeosang’s tongue darted out, licking the foam clean.

Mingi awkwardly dropped his hand. "That," he said, motioning toward the Nesting Room.

Yeosang laughed, but the sound was strained, lacking any warmth. “No, it's natural. Just because I don’t experience it doesn’t mean I’d find it weird.”

Mingi shook his head. “No, not the rut. I mean...”

His words trailed off as the front door opened again. He heard rather than smelt Jongho and Wooyoung’s arrival, the two of them bickering their way to the Nesting Room. Yunho’s familiar scent accompanied them, though he moved without a ruckus.

Yeosang didn’t press for more information, and so, when Mingi continued, he felt even more awkward. “I mean, our relationship,” he explained.

Mingi watched Yeosang closely, noting the way his brows furrowed at the mention of their relationship. A flicker of something Mingi couldn’t quite read passed through Yeosang’s eyes, making his stomach twist tighter. Did Yeosang really find their polycule weird? He had wanted to believe that Hongjoong, Wooyoung and San had been correct; he had hoped that Yeosang’s claim to not fitting in had been due to being interested in them romantically. It seemed he had been right to be pessimistic, though. Yeosang seemed greatly uncomfortable.

Yeosang downed the rest of his shake in one gulp, his eyes darting anywhere but Mingi’s. “No, it doesn’t,” Yeosang finally answered, his voice strained. He rushed to his feet, avoiding Mingi’s gaze as he placed the cup in the sink. “Don’t forget that,” he added, nodding towards the tray before rushing out of the kitchen.

Mingi sighed as he grabbed the tray and carried it to the Nesting Room. He stopped at the narrow console table in the hall, struggling to make space among the clutter of decorative items while balancing the tray. Just as he placed it down, Hongjoong finally arrived.

“Ming,” Hongjoong spoke softly, casting a wary glance toward the Nesting Room. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. I think Yeosang accidentally triggered it, but I’m not sure how,” Mingi said helplessly, shrugging. “And Sangie’s not in a good place either right now, so I don’t want to leave him alone,” he added with a whine, feeling the weight of the situation with Hongjoong’s arrival.

“That’s fine, I’ll stay with him. You go to San. He’ll handle it better with me not being there than without you,” Hongjoong reassured his calm demeanour soothing Mingi's frayed nerves. He hadn’t even considered asking one of the Alphas to take over with Yeosang, but Hongjoong was right. San would be far more protective right now, especially regarding the omegas. It would be easier to handle him if he was sure about Mingi’s safety.

“But what’s going on with Yeo?” Hongjoong asked worriedly.

“If I knew, I’d tell you,” Mingi sighed. Still, he recounted the earlier events so Hongjoong wasn’t walking in blind. Hongjoong listened attentively before pulling off his cardigan and handing it to Mingi with a reassuring pat on his arm. He then made his way toward Yeosang’s room, leaving Mingi to join the others in caring for San.

The moment he opened the door, Mingi was hit with the oppressive atmosphere. He could feel the tension rippling through the room before he even passed the threshold, sharp and stifling. San paced the floor, his body taut with barely contained tension. Seonghwa was nervously constructing a nest on the bed while Wooyoung sat nude at the edge, anxiously biting his nails as Yunho tried to comfort him. Judging by Wooyoung’s state of dress, Mingi could only conclude that his attempts to seduce San had failed, leaving the atmosphere even more charged with desperation.

“San-ah,” Mingi called softly, shutting the door behind him as quietly as he could.

San’s wide and wild eyes snapped to him instantly. His normally sweet and gentle pheromones had turned sharp and overwhelming, a clear indication of his distress.

“Where’s Yeosang?” San’s voice was almost a broken plea. Mingi’s omega whimpered painfully at the sound, and he moved towards the Alpha, desperate to soothe him.

Unlike his heats, ruts weren’t inherently sexual. Whereas Mingi found it extremely difficult to spend the time without Yeosang, he was biologically inclined to want to breed. The presence of the Alpha’s and their heat-induced ruts helped distract him for the most part. For San, however, he did not have the luxury. San was a relatively calm person on most days. He had a dominant streak but he was mostly very sweet and protective. During his ruts, though, his need to possess increased, and being kept away from Yeosang did not appease his Alpha. The pack worked tirelessly to distract him, and when successful, San would get distracted by their bodies. There was something about their post-orgasm haze that seemed to calm San’s more possessive instincts. To see that Wooyoung’s efforts had gone mostly ignored was deeply concerning. If they missed the beginning window, San would be in this state for the rest of his rut. Soon, he may even turn on the other Alpha’s, seeing them as an obstacle in his search for Yeosang.

“He’s fine,” Mingi said gently, unwilling to mention Hongjoong being with the omega. San’s jealousy would rear its head, and he’d have walked them all right into the wall they were trying to avoid. Unhappy with his response, San growled low and spun on his heels to resume his frantic pacing.

Mingi glanced helplessly at Jongho, who was trying his best to calm Seonghwa. The older omega's nest-building had grown more frenzied as San’s pheromones became increasingly oppressive.

Jongho shrugged just as helplessly. “Nothing we’ve tried has worked,” he murmured. “Even Hwa-hyung and Wooyoungie-hyung’s pheromones didn’t calm him. He just keeps saying that Yeosang is sad.”

Given the state Yeosang had been in when he entered the apartment, Mingi could only imagine how pitiful he'd looked when San had left him. He hummed in understanding.

"I need-" Seonghwa's voice cut in, breaking suddenly as his hands reached for Mingi's waistband, tugging it down with urgency.

"Hyung!" Mingi yelped, startled, but still, he stepped out of his shorts, allowing Seonghwa to take them for his nest. He handed him Hongjoong's cardigan as well, and Seonghwa took it gratefully, frowning when he caught Hongjoong's fresh scent.

"Where is he?" Seonghwa hissed, eyes flashing desperately. He had been with San since his rut began, and Mingi could see how much it had worn him down. Seonghwa looked like he was drowning, struggling to keep his head above water in the overwhelming sea of San's pheromones.

"With Yeosang," Mingi whispered, and it was all the explanation Seonghwa needed before he scrambled back to the nest, his hands moving hurriedly to finish his arrangement.

Mingi watched empathetically. The atmosphere in the room was suffocating, and the tension wound so tightly that he felt like he could barely breathe. Mingi felt moments away from joining Wooyoung and Seonghwa in their spiralling panic. His mind raced, glancing around the room for a solution. He had to calm San down before things got any worse.

Then, an idea struck him, absurd in its simplicity.

"I'm fine," he whispered to Jongho before he groaned loudly, clutching his stomach as if struck by a sudden, sharp pain. Jongho's eyes widened in concern before understanding dawned on him.

San's pacing came to an abrupt halt, his attention snapping to Mingi. His dilated pupils fixed on Mingi's form, studying him with predatory intensity. Mingi groaned again, more dramatically this time, and collapsed to the floor, clutching his stomach as if in agony.

In an instant, San was by his side, pulling him into his arms. A moment later, the other pack members surrounded them, concern etched on their faces. Mingi shook his head almost imperceptibly, discouraging them from stepping in.

"What's wrong? Where does it hurt?" San asked, his voice filled with urgency as he cradled Mingi close.

Mingi pressed a hand against San's chest, giving him a weak but reassuring smile. "I'm okay, San-ah. Just a cramp, I think," he lied, wincing for effect. He needed San focused on him but be calm.

"He must have eaten and then exercised," Jongho piped up, lamely supporting his ruse. Wooyoung rolled his eyes behind San's back and Yunho stifled a chuckle with a cough.

San frowned concernedly as he gently rubbed Mingi's stomach in soothing circles. "You know not to do that," he reprimanded softly. He stood and lifted Mingi in a princess carry, his

arms strong and protective. Mingi groaned again, playing up his role, while Wooyoung snickered behind them.

Seonghwa guided San to the bed, inviting him to lay Mingi down in the nest he had painstakingly crafted. San settled into the nest, spooning Mingi delicately as Mingi made the right complaints at the right times. The rest of the pack joined them on the oversized bed, sprawling out in close proximity, their low murmurs filling the room as a semblance of peace washed over the room.

Unfortunately, it didn't last.

After only a few minutes, Mingi felt San's body tense again, his muscles bunching against Mingi's back as the restless energy returned. San sat up, letting Mingi slip out of his hold. Mingi rolled onto his back, looking up at the agitated Alpha as he scanned the Nesting Room.

"Where is hyung?" San asked, looking over his shoulder at Seonghwa. Mingi's eyes darted to Yunho's, his panic reflected in them.

"He's coming, don't worry," Seonghwa said soothingly.

"I'll go find him," San declared, moving toward the foot of the bed. Jongho rose from his lounging position, trying to casually intercept the Alpha without alerting him that he was blocking his path.

"No, no, it's fine," Mingi interjected, sitting up and taking San's hand into his own. "He knows his way, trust me."

San's gaze softened momentarily before flooding with despair. "What about Yeosang?" he whispered, his voice breaking. "He's… He needs me."

And there it was—the inevitable. It had become almost routine by now. If they didn't manage to distract San in time, he would unravel, slipping into a state of inconsolable distress. Mingi sighed inwardly, bracing himself for another long, exhausting rut. At least the Alpha only had one natural rut a year. If they were as frequent as his own heats, Mingi was certain he'd have lost his mind by now.

Chapter End Notes

A cliffhanger 😅 Sorry, it wasn't on purpose.

But I feel bad because I am going to be taking two weeks off from posting 😭😭

Honestly, I thought I had way more free time than I actually do when I started uploading. So now the chapter's feel a bit rushed and I hvnt been satisfied with my writing for a bit because it's all done so last minute and I dnt have time to review and

edit and make adjustments so… I'm starting to hate it and I really don't want to so I'm just gonna step back for a bit.

Anyways, that's enough rambling. Sorry to those of you who look forward to the weekly uploads 💔

I'll see you in two weeks 🥺

Yeosang

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the late upload 😭 I was out and lost track of time 😅
>
> Happy Monday everyone 😘

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yeosang stared wearily into the darkness of his room. His blackout curtains blocked out the city lights, leaving only a faint sliver of light from the hallway sneaking in under the door. It was already the second day of San's rut, and things didn't seem to be going smoothly.

Yesterday, Hongjoong had stayed with him for about three hours before Jongho came looking for him. Yeosang had felt relieved when Jongho arrived. Though he knew Hongjoong meant well, having company at a time like this felt unsettling. It made him feel like an extra burden the others had to juggle alongside San's rut. When Hongjoong left however, Jongho stayed behind, the two simply swapping roles.

With Hongjoong gone, Yeosang finally felt brave enough to voice his thoughts. Jongho had just laughed, pulling him into his lap for a tight hug. Yeosang had spluttered in surprise, but before he could respond, Wooyoung had burst in, looking frazzled, and demanded Jongho return to the Nesting Room. When Wooyoung had tried to stay back too, Yeosang had put his foot down. San clearly wasn't handling the absence of his pack members well, and Yeosang didn't want to be the cause, especially since he was still unsure what San had been insinuating with his jealous comment.

So, Yeosang fell back into his usual role: keeping everyone fed and hydrated. Ruts were always more challenging than heats, with the alphas being far more headstrong than the omegas. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to shake the familiar anxiety sitting in his chest, so sleep had evaded him last night. Every time the door to the Nesting Room opened, San's potent scent blended with the rest of the pack, drifted to him, and made the ball in his chest even tighter.

Now, with the light under his door signalling someone had stepped out again, his heart raced as footsteps neared his bedroom. A soft knock came, followed by the slow creak of the door. Even before Yeosang could make out the silhouette, Seonghwa's familiar fruity scent reached him, cutting through the chocolatey scent of San's rut. Yeosang pushed himself up on his elbows.

"Hyung?" he called when Seonghwa remained silent in the doorway.

Seonghwa cleared his throat and stepped further inside. "You're awake," he said softly.

"Is everything okay?" Yeosang asked, turning on the lamp beside his bed. The sudden brightness stung his eyes, but he couldn’t shake the growing worry.

"Yeah, yeah, fine, great, it's all good," Seonghwa said, too chirpily for it to be true. Yeosang sat up, frowning.

"Are you sure? Do you need me to go out and grab something?" Yeosang got out of bed as he spoke, his mind already racing. He couldn't imagine Seonghwa would leave San for anything less than an emergency. Yeosang just couldn't imagine what the emergency could be and so he started to panic. He rushed to his closet, mind buzzing incoherently as he looked for something to throw on over his pyjamas.

"Sang-ah, wait," Seonghwa caught his wrist, pulling him back. "I don't need you to go anywhere. Please." His voice sounded worn out. "I just... I have a favour to ask you."

Seonghwa looked exhausted, his expression tight. Yeosang waited, almost afraid to hear his next words.

"Would you be okay with— and it's fine if you say no— but would you be okay coming to the Nesting Room for a bit?" Seonghwa asked, his voice tentative.

Yeosang's jaw dropped. Seonghwa's request was so far out of the realm of possibility that he struggled to make out the meaning for a minute. Did Seonghwa just ask him to come to the Nesting Room? His heart hammered wildly against his ribcage, an uncomfortable, quickening rhythm. Why would they need him? Should he say yes? But what if he seemed too eager like he was desperate to be included?

Seonghwa noticed his hesitation, the uncertainty painted across his face, and quickly amended, "It’s okay, you don’t have to. I just thought I’d ask." He looked away, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. "Then... can I borrow your shirt?" he added softly, gesturing to the pyjama shirt Yeosang was wearing. Realisation dawned on him, hitting with the force of a lightning bolt.

Seonghwa was here because San wanted him.

Yeosang had grown accustomed to his pack using his belongings during heats and ruts. He had always attributed it to his pack status. It wasn't exactly normal to want everyone in your pack's scent close during those moments, but there also wasn't anything normal about ATEEZ's approach to packhood, so he hadn't really questioned it.

But now, he wasn’t part of the pack, and yet San still wanted him.

"Is he okay?" Yeosang asked.

Seonghwa smiled, but it was a tired smile, one that didn’t quite reach his eyes. "Yeah, he’ll be fine. He’s just being a brat."

Yeosang began lifting the hem of his shirt, preparing to hand it over. He had missed his chance due to his shock and Seonghwa had rescinded his request. If he were to bring it back

up, would he not seem pathetic? As he lifted the shirt over his head, he silently berated himself for his cowardice.

The words tumbled out before he could stop them. "I—I can go," he mumbled, so quiet he wasn't sure Seonghwa would hear him. Seonghwa's reaction was immediate, his eyes lighting up as relief washed over his face.

"Really?" Seonghwa's voice rose, almost disbelieving. "Oh my God, thank you, thank you, thank you." He threw himself at Yeosang, pulling him into a tight hug. "He's been impossible to deal with," Seonghwa stepped back, looking at Yeosang like he hung all the stars in the sky. Yeosang felt his face heat up and ducked his head shyly.

"Don't worry," he reassured. "He'll behave. And if it gets too much, just tell him to stop. He'll listen."

Yeosang felt a pang of loneliness hearing Seonghwa speak so intimately about San. They knew each other in ways he might never experience and it was a hard pill to swallow. He pushed those thoughts away, focusing instead on the fact that he would, for the first time ever, be present for one of their ruts. He was extremely nervous, unsure of what to expect outside of what he'd seen in movies and the like.

"But maybe…," Seonghwa said as he reached out and took the shirt from Yeosang's hand. Yeosang blinked in confusion as Seonghwa dressed him again with a light smirk tugging at his lips. "Just to be safe."

Seonghwa offered a string of reassurances as they made their way to the Nesting Room, but none of them settled Yeosang's nerves.

"You ready?" Seonghwa asked, his hand resting on the door handle. Yeosang swallowed, the sound unnaturally loud in his ears, but he nodded anyway. Seonghwa smiled softly before pushing the door open.

The Nesting Room was, in essence, one giant bed. Technically, it was three king-sized mattresses shoved together, but the effect was seamless. The bed stretched wall to wall, leaving little floor space.

The scent hit him first—overpowering, thick, and intoxicating in its intensity. His breath caught in his throat as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. The second thing he noticed was the nearly feral eyes locking onto him. San sat at the foot of the massive bed, elbows on his knees, his posture rigid and tense. The moment the door opened, his gaze froze on Yeosang, eyes dark and hungry. Behind him, Jongho and Hongjoong mirrored San's intensity, their postures taut with unspoken tension. Further behind them lay Yunho, Mingi and Wooyoung, the two omegas looking as drained as Seonghwa had when he'd come to find Yeosang. To Yeosang's relief, everyone was fully dressed.

Yeosang turned his attention back to San, whose entire body was coiled so tightly it seemed ready to snap at any moment. He stood slowly, his gaze locked onto Yeosang with such raw intensity that it made his skin prickle. It was as if San had stumbled upon an oasis after wandering a barren desert, his thirst palpable in every deliberate step.

"San-ah," Yeosang whispered, his voice barely audible over the pounding of his heart. He couldn't believe how much tension radiated from San. Despite his muscular build, San had always moved with fluid grace, like a panther prowling with quiet confidence. But now, there was nothing smooth about him. He was predatory, tense, and on edge as if the smallest provocation would cause him to shatter completely.

Yeosang's pulse quickened as San approached, unsure of what to expect. The uncertainty seemed to echo through the room, the air thick with unspoken disquiet. Hongjoong and Jongho suddenly got to their feet, hovering just behind San, their watchful eyes tracking his every move.

"Yeosang," San breathed out, his voice hoarse. He raised his hands and cupped Yeosang's face, his touch so gentle it was almost shocking. Yeosang had instinctively braced himself for something more aggressive, something that matched the raw tension in San's posture. But San's hands moved over him with reverence, his thumbs brushing delicately along Yeosang's cheekbones as if he were fragile, something precious to be handled with care.

Then, without warning, San pulled him into a crushing embrace, pressing their bodies together as though he wanted to meld them into one. The force of it took Yeosang's breath away. The pressure wasn't painful; rather, it was overwhelming and desperate, like San was clinging to him for survival. San's face buried itself in the crook of Yeosang's neck, and he inhaled deeply, breathing him in with a long, shuddering breath like a man starved, finally given the one thing he had craved above all else.

Yeosang tentatively returned the hug, overwhelmed by the intensity of San's need. His heart raced, both from the closeness and the unexpected fragility in San's posture. San was usually so composed, but here he was, unravelling and clinging to him like a lifeline. Instinctively, he pushed out his calming pheromones, hoping to ease the rigidity in San's body and provide him with some relief. It wasn't something Yeosang had ever consciously done before, but with San so stiff in his arms, it felt like the natural response. San's arms tightened almost imperceptibly, his cocoa scent growing lighter and sweeter the longer they stood there, enveloped in each other's warmth.

Yeosang glanced over San's shoulder, catching Seonghwa's gaze. The older omega had taken a seat on the bed and was watching with a small smile, his cheeks and eyes glittering with tears. Yeosang frowned, concern growing in his chest. Taking in the others, they looked equally sombre. He shifted his gaze to the others. Jongho and Hongjoong had relaxed back onto the bed, their earlier tension melting away, but there was something else in their expressions. Their eyes shimmered with an odd mixture of relief and sadness. Even Wooyoung and Mingi, who were curled up in Yunho's arms on the bed, looked oddly subdued.

A knot of unease tightened in Yeosang's chest. He couldn't help but wonder if they were hurt. He wasn't part of their pack after all. Even when he had been, he hadn't shared the deep, intimate bond that they had cultivated throughout the years. And yet, here he was, the one to calm San down when even Seonghwa had seemed at a loss. The realisation made him feel even more like an outsider, intruding on something he wasn't meant to be part of. Did they resent him for being the one San wanted at this moment?

Yunho was the only one in the room who seemed relaxed, and so Yeosang looked to him for some kind of guidance. An almost playful smile flitted across the Alpha's lips as their eyes met, and he mouthed, "watch out," just a split second before San let Yeosang go.

Yeosang barely had time to process his brief moment of freedom before San had lifted him clean off his feet and tossed him over his shoulder with a grunt. A few chuckles sounded through the room, easing the nerves that had been building within him. His attention was consumed by San's single-minded determination as the Alpha carried him towards the oversized bed and practically tossed him into the nest of clothes in the middle of the bed. The mixed scents of the pack surrounded him, overwhelming his senses for just a moment before San followed him down, pinning him firmly to the mattress. San's weight pressed him into the soft layers of clothes beneath them, the Alpha's capturing both of his wrists and holding them above his head. Yeosang could barely move under San's grip as the Alpha dropped his face to his neck, clearly aiming for his scent gland.

But, before San could make contact, Jongho's hand shot out, gripping San by the shoulder and pulling him back.

A feral snarl tore from San's throat, the menacing sound reverberating through the room. Yeosang froze, fear spiking in his chest at the sound. For a brief moment, he was back at the kitchen table, scared to look or touch any of his pack members.

Jongho, unphased by San's aggressive display, met the Alpha's gaze with a firm look. "You have to ask," he scolded.

San's head snapped back to Yeosang, and all the feral intensity in his eyes was replaced with panic. He scrambled off of Yeosang, backing away so quickly that it left the omega more confused than afraid. He watched, stunned, as San moved as far from him as possible, apologising repeatedly. Yeosang sat up slowly, looking around at the others for answers. The room had gone quiet, his confusion shared with the others.

Understanding dawned on Hongjoong's face. "San-ah," he said, his voice soothing. "It's not like that. Your growls just scared him."

It wasn't until then that Yeosang realised that his scent had soured, giving away the burst of anxiety that had flared in his chest at the sound of San's snarl. Yeosang quickly nodded in agreement. The sound had triggered something deep within him, something reflexive that he didn't know how to fix, but he hadn't actually been afraid of San himself. San looked completely horrified with himself, his cocoa scent turning bitter with guilt.

"It's okay," Yeosang said softly. "I'm fine," he promised, and, for the first time in a long time, he found the words to be true. The fear that had gripped him a moment ago had faded the moment he'd laid eyes on San's panicked expression. He knew ruts often amplified the protective instincts of Alphas, and he could see just how much his momentary fear had affected San in this vulnerable state.

"You didn't hurt me, I'm fine," he repeated, his voice steady. He held out his hand in invitation, ignoring the soft coo from Wooyoung in the background. "Come here."

San's eyes widened slightly, the relief immediate. He still looked hesitant, caught between his desire to prevent further stress and his instinct to claim what he seemed to desperately crave. After a tense pause, San finally made his way back toward him. Yeosang exhaled with relief, and the others seemed to breathe out with him, silently observing San as he returned to him.

San threw a leg over Yeosang's thighs, his weight pressing down on him as he settled on top once more. He hovered there for a moment, eyes searching Yeosang's for any sign of discomfort.

"Is this okay?" he asked Yeosang, the intensity in his eyes restrained by his need to protect.

With San so close, the others seemed to fade into the background, allowing Yeosang to react without thinking about their reactions. His hand trembled slightly as he reached up, sliding his fingers into San's hair and pulling him down in a silent offering. San's breath ghosted over Yeosang's throat before he placed a soft kiss against his skin. San nosed along Yeosang's neck, his breath coming in soft, shaky exhales until he reached Yeosang's scent gland. He paused, hovering over the stretch of skin as if waiting for the last sign that this was truly okay.

Yeosang's body responded before his mind could. He tilted his head slightly, baring his neck in silent permission. He distantly registered a soft gasp, but his focus remained solely on San as the Alpha pressed his nose into his scent gland. Goosebumps bloomed over his body as San nuzzled and nosed at the sensitive spot. The sensation was entirely unfamiliar. Yeosang could count on one hand the number of people who had scented him there, and he'd still have fingers left over.

His heartbeat quickened as his scent intensified, responding to San's touch. It was intimate, almost too much. The Alpha's gentle stimulation coaxed the gland to release more of his scent, the room filling with a sweet scent that was uniquely their own. Yeosang forced his eyes open, unaware of when he had shut them, to begin with. He scanned the room, suddenly needing reassurance that he wasn't stepping over any boundaries. His gaze found Seonghwa, who had been making his way over. The omega paused when their eyes met, momentarily startled before breaking into a grin and crawling over faster.

San also paused, lifting his head just enough to glance at Seonghwa before a rumble vibrated from his chest. He buried his face back into Yeosang's neck, his grip tightening slightly, ignoring Seonghwa as he nestled up beside Yeosang.

Seonghwa didn't seem bothered. He propped himself up on one elbow, reaching out to gently touch Yeosang's cheek. "You okay?" he asked softly, his thumb brushing over the warm skin.

His cheeks grew hotter, the flush spreading under the older man's touch. He nodded, a little shy, unsure of how to respond in the intimacy of the moment. Seonghwa's grin mellowed into a warmer smile and he leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to Yeosang's cheek. "Thanks for being here," he murmured, his breath warm against Yeosang's skin.

Yeosang could feel the heat in his face. He nodded shyly. Seonghwa smiled and kissed his cheek softly. "Thanks for being here," he murmured. Yeosang's heart tripled its pace as he

realised how close Seonghwa's lips were to the corner of his mouth; just a tiny shift left, and it would have been a real kiss.

"Ah," he gasped softly, unable to hold back the sound at the sharp sensation.

Seonghwa chuckled, covering his mouth to hide his smile. He pulled back and gave San a light slap on the shoulder.

"Yeah, he's a biter," Wooyoung giggled from above Yeosang's head. Yeosang craned his neck to look up, but San took the opportunity to gently nip at his throat. The bite was soft but sharp enough to make Yeosang shiver.

"San-ah," Yeosang said in surprise, squirming slightly. They had to go back to work soon, and if San kept this up, he'd leave a mark.

"Be nice," Seonghwa scolded, though the grin on his face was playful. San grumbled but relented, sitting up. Wooyoung took the moment to shuffle closer, lifting Yeosang's head.

Yeosang let out a startled noise but allowed Wooyoung to slide his leg underneath, making himself a pillow. Seonghwa shifted as well, moving higher up the bed to rest his head on Wooyoung's chest then curled up against Yeosang's side. San watched them, his gaze heavy with satisfaction, before glancing around the room.

"Come closer," San beckoned Yunho and Mingi, who were leaning against the wall. Yunho smiled and gently nudged Mingi forward until the tall rapper settled down on Yeosang's other side, fitting perfectly into the growing pile.

"I guess it's time for our dog pile," Hongjoong chuckled as he joined them, finding his place next to Mingi and resting his head on the omega's outstretched arm.

"What are we doing?" Yeosang whispered to Seonghwa.

"Sleeping, hopefully. He's been up this entire time," Seonghwa replied, nodding in San's direction. Yeosang observed San carefully watch as Yunho nestled in, curling against Hongjoong's back and draping a long leg over both him and Mingi. Only when Jongho had settled beside Wooyoung did San seemed satisfied with the arrangement. With a small smile, he gracefully rose off Yeosang's lap. Instead of settling on the outside of the pile, San moved down to Seonghwa's legs. He tapped the older omega's calf, waiting for Seonghwa to shift onto his back and spread his legs slightly. San then slotted himself into the space, resting his head on Seonghwa's thigh and hip. The position placed him close to Yeosang, allowing San to wrap an arm around both Seonghwa's thigh and Yeosang's torso, pulling them closer.

Yeosang lay still, trying not to move too much and disturb the bodies pressed against him. The warmth and closeness of the pack was comforting, but it also left him with an overwhelming sense of loss. He found himself wishing he still had his bonds, ao that he could feel connected to them in such an intimate moment. Despite the pain that had accompanied it, he still missed the echoes of their emotions pulsating in the background of his consciousness.

“Ugh, the light,” Wooyoung groaned, breaking through Yeosang’s darkening thoughts. Yeosang giggled as the others erupted into a chorus of groans and complaints, followed by at least two quick “not it”s

“I’ll get it,” Yeosang offered, beginning to sit up.

“No!” nearly everyone said at once. San’s arm tightened, blocking him from rising further.

“You can’t move if you’re in the middle,” Yunho explained as he got up, stalking toward the light switch. “We really need to get those clapping lights or something,” he muttered as he flipped it off.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, no cliffhanger!

Thank you for all the sweet comments. I’ve been getting pretty overwhelmed trying to stay on top of posting so it was nice to hear you guys were still enjoying it.

On that note, I do think I need to change the update schedule for my own sanity. So I’m thinking I’ll start posting biweekly from now on. And like… maybe if I finish early I’ll upload early but the two weeks is much easier on me rn.

Anyways, that’s enough rambling from me. Thank you again ❤️❤️❤️

Hongjoong

Chapter Summary

Hello my loves!

Thank you for your patience during this little hiccup in the upload schedule. Here's the latest chapter for your enjoyment 😘

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hongjoong awoke to hushed whispers and a tickle of hair brushing his nose. Groggily, he took note of his bearings. He was still sandwiched between the two tallest members of ATEEZ, but they had rotated at some point in the night, and now, his back was heated by the warmth of the omega behind him. Mingi's arm draped over him to embrace the figure nestled against his chest. Yunho was curled into Hongjoong's chest, head tucked under his chin as he breathed evenly. A wave of fondness filled Hongjoong, and he gently patted the stray hairs back onto Yunho's head.

A quiet, playful murmur caught his attention, reminding him of what had pulled him from sleep.

"Wooyoung, they're going to wake up," Yeosang whispered, voice tinged with mild exasperation.

"So?" Wooyoung whispered back. "I just want to give my very cute boyfriend a morning kiss." Hongjoong's lips curved into a smile. He had been concerned that the two had not been able to explore their new relationship but he never should have doubted Wooyoung's proactiveness.

"Who said I'm your boyfriend?" Yeosang retorted, making Hongjoong smile wider. Yeosang also seemed to be quite comfortable with the way things were progressing, seeing as he had returned to his dry humour.

"Me," Wooyoung replied confidently.

There was a faint shuffling sound, no doubt Wooyoung leaning in for a kiss, which Hongjoong could visualise Yeosang half-heartedly resisting. Hongjoong shifted slightly, trying to catch a glimpse of the adorable scene, calling attention to himself. The moment he moved, though, Yunho lifted his head, craning back to meet his gaze. Clear brown eyes met his own. Hongjoong raised a brow inquiringly.

"Let's not interrupt them," Yunho mouthed carefully. He waited for Hongjoong’s agreement before settling back into Hongjoong's embrace.

"Did you sleep well?" Hongjoong whispered, giving Yunho's neck a gentle squeeze. Clearly, the Alpha had been awake for quite a while.

Yunho hummed softly in reply, pressing a light kiss to Hongjoong's jaw affectionately before burrowing his face back against Hongjoong's throat. As Hongjoong lay quietly, he felt the others around him gain consciousness as their bonds flared awake. Like them though, they also didn’t call attention to themselves, allowing Yeosang his perceived privacy.

They lay there quietly, basking in each other’s warmth until Wooyoung and Yeosang’s murmurs faded into the calm of the room. Then, with a languid stretch, Yunho pulled away, arms reaching overhead and his shirt lifting, revealing a sliver of skin that had Hongjoong’s gaze lingering. Mingi’s arm lifted lazily, reaching out to poke Yunho’s side playfully.

"Morning, Princess," Yunho laughed, leaning over him to place a soft kiss on Mingi's cheek.

“I’m hungry,” the omega grumbled, his voice an octave lower due to sleep.

“I'll make breakfast,” Yunho offered quickly. “Any requests?"

"Pancakes!" Jongho's voice piped up from somewhere above them.

"Pancakes? What are you, American?" Seonghwa teased from across the room. Hongjoong chuckled. It was an odd breakfast choice, but considering how often they travelled, it wasn’t particularly out of character to have pancakes for breakfast.

"Pancakes sound good. Let's have an English-style breakfast today, then," Yunho agreed.

“Sounds good,” Hongjoong agreed easily, detangling himself from the pile of limbs to go wash up.

"I'll make the pancakes. You always burn them," Wooyoung offered teasingly.

"Then I want an omelette," San chimed in. Hongjoong's heart warmed as he realised that, for the first time since they'd moved, they could all leave the Nesting Room without worry. Usually, most of the members stayed in with whoever was experiencing their cycle to avoid making Yeosang uncomfortable, but with him there, everyone was free to come and go as they pleased.

"Make it yourself, big guy," Wooyoung shot back playfully.

Breakfast turned into quite a rambunctious affair. The table was filled with dishes each member had contributed to: Yunho's French toast, Wooyoung's pancakes, Jongho's cut-up fruits, San's omelettes, Seonghwa's scrambled eggs, Hongjoong's breakfast potatoes, and Mingi's freshly brewed coffee. Yeosang, though eager to help, had been unanimously voted down from anything requiring heat. His resulting pout had almost made Hongjoong give in but Seonghwa had stepped in and delegated the task of setting the table. As Hongjoong looked at the spread, he couldn't help but wonder if they'd managed to finish it all.

"Thank you for the meal," Seonghwa said, echoing the others. The room grew quiet except for the sound of forks and requests for "syrup, please" or "pass the salt."

Hongjoong smiled to himself, savouring the rare, festive atmosphere. They'd soon be knee-deep in comeback preparations, meaning indulgent breakfasts like this would be few and far between. Chances for them to all sit down for a meal would also be just as rare. He silently appreciated the scene knowing soon, he would barely see them for days on end. Everyone looked relaxed and content, their faces still slightly swollen with sleep. Hongjoong took in Yeosang’s relaxed form across from him, his hair adorably tousled and his lips jutting out as he chewed. A deep warmth spread through Hongjoong chest, his Alpha purring with satisfaction at seeing his loved ones gathered, content, and at peace.

Cleanup was just as lively as breakfast had been. San took charge, directing the omegas to shower and relax while the Alphas handled loading the dishwasher and storing leftovers. Hongjoong watched the bulky Alpha move around with an unusually content smile.

"Someone's chirpy," Hongjoong teased. San's grin widened as he pulled Hongjoong into a hug so tight it bordered on uncomfortable. Hongjoong laughed painfully, rubbing his back firmly until San pulled away.

"Sorry, I just needed to get that out," San laughed. Hongjoong patted his cheek understandingly.

"I don't think I've ever seen you this calm during a rut," he mused, tugging on San's cheeks to stretch his smile further. Even when they had managed to distract him in the past, San had rarely smiled and always carried tension in every line of his body. It was refreshing to see the lightness in his form and the easy laughter that lit up his whole face as his eyes disappeared into crescents.

"I've never felt this calm, that's why," San replied, pressing a hand to his chest in emphasis. Hongjoong nodded empathetically, the ghost of the oppressive tightness from a multitude of ruts passing through his chest. "It's just... that feeling... it's gone." San's grin returned, and Hongjoong couldn't help but mirror it.

"I'm glad," he said softly.

San pulled him in for another hug, this one far more gentle, and kissed the crown of his head.

“If you’re done being mushy, get back to work,” Yunho teased lightly, tossing a dishcloth at them as he spoke. They laughed as they separated and got back to helping Jongho and Yunho finish the cleanup. Once done, the four of them headed to Yunho's room to shower, a luxury during this usually tumultuous time. Judging from the wet shower, the omegas had already come and gone. Their shower took longer than usual since San insisted on washing them all. Despite not appreciating the lack of autonomy, Hongjoong relented, as did the other two. All of them understood the pressing need that came with ruts; the need to provide, to care, and to protect. This was just one of the ways San fulfilled that need.

When they returned to the Nesting Room, however, the moment of peace had passed. Mingi awaited them, sitting nervously on the edge of the bed. Hongjoong touched his bond

worriedly and found it writhing with agitation.

“Where are the others?” San asked, stepping in behind him.

"Uh...," Mingi scratched his head awkwardly, frustration flashing in his eyes. Hongjoong’s heart twisted uneasily.

San tensed, a growl slipping out as he spun around, ready to leave, only to be stopped by Yunho's hand on his arm.

"You, wait," Yunho said, pointing firmly at San, who ground his jaw in silent frustration but stopped in his tracks. Satisfied he wouldn't go storming off, the taller Alpha turned to Mingi.

“What happened, Princess?" Yunho asked gently, sitting beside him on the bed.

"I- I don't know," Mingi said, looking defeated. "After his shower, Yeosang said he'd be in his room if we needed him. Seonghwa-hyung and Wooyoungie are trying to get him to come back," he explained.

Hongjoong and Jongho exchanged a look.

Without a word, Hongjoong slipped past the others and left the Nesting Room, hearing the soft click of the door as Jongho quietly shut it behind him. He strode down the hall, mind reeling. Everything had been fine, hadn’t it? Why had Yeosang suddenly retreated? Yeosang’s door had been shut when they’d passed by but it had opened in the moments they had been gone. Seonghwa was standing in the doorway now, arms crossed tightly as he gnawed on his lower lip.

“What’s wrong, hun?” Hongjoong asked softly. Seonghwa’s head snapped towards him, eyes filling with relief.

“He won’t say,” Seonghwa replied, shrugging. Hongjoong slipped past Seonghwa, patting his hip reassuringly before stepping further into the room.

Yeosang sat on his bed, sunlight streaming in and casting a soft glow around him. The sight momentarily caught Hongjoong off guard; Yeosang looked ethereal, his expression both vulnerable and distant. Noticing Hongjoong, Yeosang quickly looked down, his hands fidgeting in his lap. Wooyoung glanced at him, helplessly shaking his head.

“Yeosang,” Hongjoong said softly. “Baby, what happened? What’s wrong?”

Yeosang’s gaze had flickered upwards at the pet name just long enough for Hongjoong to catch the confusion in his gaze.

“Nothing,” Yeosang mumbled, twisting his fingers together.

Hongjoong observed the nervous habit for a moment, wracking his brain as to what could have possibly triggered it.

"Can I sit?" he asked Yeosang, approaching the edge of his bed. He kept his tone calm and light, settling down when Yeosang nodded without meeting his eyes. "Is there a reason you don't want to come back to the Nest?" he asked softly.

Yeosang shrugged one shoulder.

"Sang-ah," he murmured, leaning forward to catch Yeosang's chin. "Look at me, please?" he coaxed, gently upturning Yeosang's face. Yeosang didn't fight him, but his eyes focused on the tip of Hongjoong's nose instead of his eyes.

"Tell me what's wrong," he said softly. "Do you need some alone time?" he asked, wondering if perhaps the younger had gotten overstimulated after spending the night only to immediately follow it up with a boisterous breakfast.

Yeosang shook his head, his hair falling into his eyes. Hongjoong released his chin to tuck the hair behind his ear.

"Come one, tell me. Sannie's waiting for us," Hongjoong said softly, hoping the mention of San might encourage him. He'd come for him last night, after all. Instead, Yeosang looked distressed, his face paling.

"Oh! It's okay! Go to him. I didn't mean to…," he began, gesturing wildly towards the door as if ready to usher them out. "I'm fine, I promise."

"We will, don't worry about that," Seonghwa quickly interrupted. "He's fine too, he has the others."

The guilt etched onto Yeosang's face only deepened. "Nothing's wrong," he said, looking back at Hongjoong. "I just... I didn't want to overstay my welcome, that's all. You guys should-."

"Overstay?" Wooyoung interrupted, sounding incredulous. "How could you overstay anything? You're *under* -staying right now!" Hongjoong nodded firmly in agreement. He needed Yeosang to know he was always wanted, no matter what. This insecurity was a monster of his own creation and one that must die by his own hands.

Before Yeosang could respond, San appeared in the doorway, Jongho standing sheepishly behind him. Without a word, San stalked into the room and headed straight towards them. Despite the aggression in his steps, his bond was just mildly agitated, so Hongjoong allowed him to lean past him and grab Yeosang by his arm.

"Wait," Yeosang exclaimed as San lowered his body and hoisted Yeosang over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. "Hyung!" Yeosang yelped, looking to him for help. Hongjoong turned to Jongho for answers. The young Alpha was normally very level-headed and would think things through before acting and, by his lack of reaction, he had agreed to allow San to do this.

Instead, Jongho just slapped San's sleeveless arm, the sound of skin echoing in the quiet space. "Don't be such a brute," he berated lightly.

Yeosang blubbered incoherently, though he didn’t resist, just lying limply over San’s shoulders.

"What are you guys doing?" Wooyoung asked, confusion clear on his face.

"Being a little more proactive," Jongho smiled wryly, following San out of the room. Hongjoong's brows shot up in surprise, the words completely out of character. Then again, it seems Yeosang has been having that effect on him lately.

Hongjoong stared at the empty doorway for a moment, and both Wooyoung and Seonghwa were stunned into silence.

"Well," Hongjoong sighed. "Let's go see what that's about."

Hongjoong briefly thought that he should be a lot more stressed than he was. If this had happened two months ago, San would not have made it through the doorway forget leaving the room with the omega in tow. Now, though, Hongjoong was tempted to just allow things to play out. He was tired of fighting his instincts and trying to plan every little step. Perhaps a little chaos is just what the doctor prescribed.

They entered the Nesting Room just in time to watch San gently toss Yeosang on the bed beside Yunho. Yeosang scrambled upright and tried to stand, only for the man on the bed to catch him by the waist and tug him into his lap.

“Yunho!” Yeosng gasped in shock, whipping his head to the side to try to see his face.

"What're we doing?" Seonghwa asked slowly, his tone light and casual despite the concern on his face. Hongjoong hid a smile, pretending to rub his mouth. Seonghwa sounded like an exasperated kindergarten teacher, catching their students tangled up in yet another mischievous act.

"He's running again," San pointed at Yeosang accusingly.

"I'm not running!" Yeosang argued, trying to get up once again, only for Yunho to pull him back. Gone was the guilty expression he’d worn in his bedroom, replaced by heated incredulity. He pointed back at San just as accusingly. “I was trying to give you guys some space!”

Hongjoong mentally patted himself for not interrupting San earlier. It seemed the Alpha’s behaviour had caught Yeosang completely off guard, and he was no longer policing his own behaviour. The truth had slipped out uninhibited. Hongjoong finally understood his hesitancy to say it. He must have felt uncomfortable bringing it up and wanted to retreat inconspicuously.

“Space for what?” San snapped, too annoyed to read between the lines. Hongjoong touched the muscular man's arm, gently urging him to calm down.

Yeosang blushed and shrank back into Yunho’s hold, ducking his head shyly..

"Nothing, never mind," he mumbled. Yunho's lips pursed tightly but Hongjoong could still see the curvature of the smile he was trying to suppress.

"Oh," San breathed out. His empty response had the pack rushing to fill in the space.

"He's fine without it," Seonghwa tried to reassure him, the other's words mirroring his sentiment.

"Just join us then," Wooyoung said just a beat later than the others, his words filling the room.

"Wooyoung!" Hongjoong reprimanded in unison with the rest of the pack. The reprimand had been instinctive, but the moment it was out, Hongjoong realised it had been a mistake. Rather than the discomfort he'd expected to see on Yeosang's face, he was instead faced with Yeosang's deflating frame. Immediately, he recognised how the reprimand could be taken as disapproval, a rejection of having Yeosang in their polycule.

"What?" Wooyoung yelled back, huffing and crossing his arms tightly. "If he knows, it might make him feel better."

"Or not," Mingi argued, getting on his knees to match Wooyoung's height.

"Mingi," Hongjoong warned.

"We won't know anything unless we talk about it. He already left the pack. What else do we have to lose?" Wooyoung argued back heatedly, glaring at the man on the bed.

"Still, you could at least be more tactful about it," Mingi insisted.

"Enough," Hongjoong snapped, startling them out of their staring contest. Mingi grumbled and sat back on his heels. Hongjoong turned his attention to Yeosang, who was watching them cautiously.

"What Wooyoung was trying to say is that we would love to have you in our," Hongjoong gestured to the pack. His heart was thundering in his chest as he spoke as nerves settled low in his stomach. He wasn't sure how to phrase his feelings and it was even harder since he was speaking on behalf of the pack. "I meant it when I said we would have you in whatever capacity we could."

Somehow, he misstepped again. Yeosang physically flinched at his words and shook his head roughly, Yunho having to lean back to avoid being hit. " It's okay," Yeosang said thickly.

Hongjoong looked around in a panic, not sure if he'd been wrong about Yeosang's feelings or if he had somehow confused the omega.

"No, no, no. He doesn't mean it like that," Wooyoung quickly said.

"Yeah, he just means we'll go as far as you're comfortable," Jongho explained on his behalf. Hongjoong nodded in agreement.

“Whether it’s friends, pack, or lovers, whatever you can give, we’ll take,” Seonghwa further elaborated, cheeks turning a rosy pink as he spoke.

Yeosang’s eyes doubled in size, his mouth parting in surprise. “Lovers?” he repeated.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, I'm awful for that cliffhanger 😭 I just want to finish the scene from Yeo's POV so I ended it here😅

and Idk if y'all already noticed but when I was writing this I kept asking myself why I didn’t just make the Nesting Room have an ensuite. Like so many holes in the logic but for continuity’s sake, I kept it the same.

Yeosang

Chapter Notes

> This is a pretty short chapter since it's really just wrapping up the scene from last time.
>
> Thank you to everyone who has been leaving kudos and commenting even though I had you waiting 2 weeks for like 5 words 😩. Next chapter will be longer, I promise 🫶🫶

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Seonghwa nodded once, face perfectly neutral. Yeosang glanced around the room, trying to read the atmosphere better. Wooyoung's playful invitation had been hijacked by the rest of his pack and Yeosang wasn't sure how to react. He once again found himself missing the bond they had once shared. Navigating this scenario would have been much easier if he could just tap on their bonds and feel an echo of their emotions. What would he have felt? Amusement? Worry? Revulsion?

Carefully, he took in the expressions on their faces. San's eyebrows were raised slightly, a hint of a smile on his mouth. Wooyoung's grin was far more obvious, mischievous and smug. Mingi avoided his gaze entirely, toying absentmindedly with the bedsheets. Hongjoong had crossed his arms and was studying him with a focus that mirrored his own. Jongho leaned against the wall, posture and expression relaxed. Behind him, though he couldn't see his face, Yunho's scent remained light and fresh, completely untouched by turmoil.

The fragile hope that had bloomed in his chest wilted defeatedly. His omega, the instinctual part of him, recoiled like a wounded animal, curling tightly into itself.

The silence grew heavier with every passing second. Finally, Yeosang let out a laugh. Soft, bitter, and painfully out of place.

Seonghwa's expression faltered, confusion flickering across his features. That only made Yeosang laugh harder, the sound spilling out uncontrollably. His shoulders shook with the effort to suppress it, but it was no use.

"What?" Jongho asked, straightening from his position against the wall.

"Nothing, nothing," Yeosang replied, covering his face with one hand as tears burned at the corners of his eyes. He forced another laugh, secretly wiping the tears before they could spill.

"What's funny?" Mingi asked, his deep voice coming out weakly. Now it was Yeosang's turn to look confused. He quickly clamped his mouth shut when no one else joined his laughter on what clearly felt like a cruel joke.

“You’re serious?” he asked, heart pounding in his chest.

“I wouldn’t joke about something like this,” Seonghwa replied thickly, furrowed brows mirroring the ache in Yeosang’s chest.

"All of you?" Yeosang asked disbelievingly, looking around the room again. Nods, murmurs of agreement, and quiet gestures met his disbelief.

His mind raced, the past years flashing by like a catalogue. Why were they suddenly interested in him joining their polycule? There were no clues, no moments he could remember that would have foreshadowed this scenario. As he looked around the room, his focus landed on Wooyoung. His budding relationship with Wooyoung had been the only change recently. Was it possible that the pack were struggling with their relationship type changing? Was their solution that they just absorbed him into their polycule so Wooyoung wasn’t dating an outsider?

No, there was nothing logical about that.

“Why?” The question slipped out before he could control it. It’s just that none of it made sense.

Then… was it because he was an omega?

Yeosang thought carefully about the pack’s changed behaviour since his return from the hospital. They had all changed drastically: whether it was Yunho cooking for him, Seonghwa dragging him to take a nap, Hongjoong helping him through a panic attack, Jongho inviting him to watch a show with him, Wooyoung confessing, Mingi hugging and comforting him, or San needing him in the Nesting Room. He’d been sceptical initially but recently, he realised he’d stopped thinking about it so frequently and had let his guard down. This confession from the pack had him scrambling to protect himself, terrified of what would happen to his heart if he let himself believe them. There had to be something else going on.

“Sang-ah,” Seonghwa’s voice broke through his spiralling thoughts. He was right in front of him now, kneeling on the bed with his face inches away. Yeosang flinched back, startled by his sudden appearance. Yunho’s arms tightened imperceptibly as though to reassure him.

“Were you listening?” Seonghwa asked, tilting his head slightly, concern etched into his features.

Yeosang cursed under his breath as his eyes began to blur. He shook his head, mumbling a soft, “No, sorry.”

He felt so far out of his depth, flailing in a sea of his emotions with no way to tell which direction the surface was in. Something about Seonghwa’s pained expression made controlling his feelings so much harder. He wanted to throw himself in the older man’s arms and have him make everything make sense again. He wanted the comfort and safety that only Seonghwa ever seemed capable of providing. He quickly averted his gaze, afraid the intense longing would be visible to the human eye.

“No, look at hyung,” Seonghwa said firmly, catching him by the jaw. The gesture was uncharacteristically rough. Seonghwa usually treated him like he was fragile glass, susceptible to breaking under the slightest pressure. Now though, he forced Yeosang’s face upwards and captured his mouth in a scorching kiss.

Yeosang whimpered, the sound mortifying to his own ears. Yunho groaned in his ear, the sound immediately distracting him from his own embarrassment. He could feel the hands on his waist clenching and unclenching as Yunho’s arms tensed. Seonghwa didn’t give Yeosang a chance to form another coherent thought. His kiss burned like wildfire, spreading with a heat so intense that it scorched away every coherent thought Yeosang might have clung to. Despite this, Yeosang suddenly felt like he had surfaced, Seonghwa’s kiss holding him afloat. Seonghwa’s grip on his jaw tightened, his fingers firm yet trembling slightly. Every movement of his lips against Yeosang was consuming, filled with a wave of raw need that threatened to overwhelm Yeosang.

Yeosang’s breath hitched as Seonghwa devoured him without a trace of his usual gentleness. He pressed forward, pushing Yeosang into the solid body of the Alpha still holding him. Seonghwa’s fingers slid from Yeosang’s jaw to tangle in his hair as his lips demanded everything, holding him in place as though afraid he might vanish. Yeosang’s hands clutched at Yunho’s arm, his fingers twisting the fabric of his shirt as he tried to ground himself. Yunho’s hand came to rest on top of his, long fingers enveloping both his hands in a tight grip. When Seonghwa finally drew back, his breathing was ragged, chest rising and falling in time with Yeosang’s. His forehead rested lightly against Yeosang’s, their proximity amplifying the intensity of his dark stare. Seonghwa’s eyes burned with the same fire Yeosang had only ever seen when he performed on stage, his skin prickling under the weight of Seonghwa’s gaze, every nerve ending alive with sensation. He felt frozen in place, caught in a spell he couldn’t break, like prey held captive under the unyielding stare of a predator.

“This isn’t something new, Yeosang-ah,” Seonghwa murmured, his voice hoarse. “I- *we’ve* felt this way for years. We just weren’t sure how to broach the topic when we weren’t sure how you felt about us.”

Yeosang tried to respond, but his voice cracked on the first syllable, and he quickly clamped his mouth shut. Seonghwa’s lips quirked into a soft, teasing smirk as he released Yeosang’s hair and sat back on his heels, giving him back control of his head.

“I know it’s very sudden and lacking in any kind of decorum,” Yunho spoke up, his deep voice steady as his thumb brushed against the back of Yeosang’s hand. “But it just feels like the longer we drag this out, the more unsure you feel about where you fit in.”

Yeosang tugged lightly at Yunho’s hold, subconsciously testing it, but the Alpha’s grip only firmed in response. Oddly, the possessiveness settled him, his omega instincts preening at the silent display of care and protection.

“Even if you don’t like us that way or, if you, I don’t know…” Mingi’s voice faltered as he fiddled with the edge of the bedsheet, his fingers moving restlessly. The action suddenly registered in Yeosang’s mind as nervous fiddling. He hadn’t been indifferent to the confession, he’d been trying to mask his nerves. Guilt filled his stomach and he gnawed at his swollen lip anxiously, unsure of how to soothe the seated omega.

“We figured it’s a risk worth taking if it makes things clearer for you,” Mingi continued. “Even if you only like Wooyoung, we’d-”

“I like you too,” Yeosang blurted out, the words tumbling from his lips before his brain had the chance to intervene. His only thought had been to erase the uncertainty etched on Mingi’s face, to smooth over the apprehension that tugged at the omega’s pout.

But the weight of what he’d just confessed hit him like a freight train the moment Mingi’s expression lit up with relief. Yeosang’s mouth fell open in a silent gasp, and his head dropped forward as his knees curled instinctively to his chest. He hid behind his arms, his face burning with mortification. Years of carefully guarded feelings, secrets he’d vowed to keep buried, had unravelled in mere seconds.

All because he couldn’t stand seeing Mingi look so unsure.

Shyness overwhelmed him like a tidal wave, a voice in the back of his mind cruelly whispering, *‘There’s no way they all feel the same. You’re delusional. You’ve read into things that aren’t there.’*

“Only Mingi?” Yunho’s voice was light, teasing. Yunho asked, his voice teasing but laced with genuine curiosity. The warmth of his breath tickled Yeosang’s already burning ear, making him squirm. He shook his head but couldn’t get himself to verbalise it, suddenly terrified of the implication of his words.

Yunho loosened his hold, dropping his arms to give Yeosang space, but the omega instinctively took his hand without thinking. It wasn’t until he had guided Yunho’s arm back around his waist that he realised what he’d done. He dropped it quickly as the Alpha behind him let out an incredulous laugh, the sound light and full of pure joy.

“That’s enough of an answer for me right now,” Yunho said, the gentle vibrations of his laughter resonating through Yeosang as he held him close.

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Chapter End Notes

> Ahhhhh we’re getting placesss 🤗 somehow I keep writing Yunho always at the crime scene and it’s like so on brand but YuYu deserves a kiss of his own 😭
>
> Upload is late because I’ve been trying to train my cats to use an automatic litter box and I thought they got the hang of it so I took the manual one away but it turns out my baby boy was not ready for that and so he pissed in the hammock of one of their cat trees. I had to clean it and then got distracted and lost track of time. My room still smells like piss 😭🤢💔💔💔

Anyways, I hope you guys enjoyed this short a** chapter (If you notice any mistakes, please point it out)

Hugs and kisses my darlings 😘😘

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